



A close-up, slightly blurred portrait of a young person with dark hair and brown eyes, looking downwards with a somber expression.

And the Rat Laughed

Nava Semel

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By

Nava Semel

Translated From Hebrew by Miriam

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And the Rat Laughed

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Also by Nava Semel (in translation)

Becoming Gershona

Flying Lessons

Bride on Paper

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Part One

The Story

A day in Tel Aviv, late 1999

1

How to tell this story?

Things that had been locked inside her have begun showing through lately.

But maybe there's no need to tell it. The old woman keeps trying to defend her unswerving resolve, and to stick to her silence. For so many years she's kept the story within her. And now, the question refuses to be muted any longer. It rises out of its grave, egging her on, intrusive.

How should the story be told?

But maybe it's been told already. Leaking through in moments of distraction, forcing its way to the surface whenever she loosened her grip. And since the thought of that story being jostled about, unattended and vulnerable without her, is too unsettling, it's as if she has no choice but to assume the role of storyteller.

But she doesn't know how. And just as she has repressed the story, so too does she now repress the very question of how to tell it. Because if she were to give it a voice, the story would burst through without her being able to contain it, and its severed limbs would scatter in all directions, unfamiliar even to her.

Insofar as it depends on her, she's not going to tell the story in full.

I was their little girl. Father's and Mother's. I loved them.

That could be the beginning.

No.

That would put an end to the story even before it began.

Even when she pent it up inside her, the story would stab its way through, jabbing its spikes into her. Other spikes dissolved or fell off, and she'd hoped that time would do a good job of covering things up, obliterating whatever should not be remembered, should not be retold even to herself. On rare occasions, when she did manage to summon one particular spike, memory would turn against her, refusing to play along. It was only in distraction, when she had abandoned control, that the unsummoned spike would jab into her, foisting itself on her and dragging her deep into the entrails of the story.

I was a little girl.

I did not choose to be born.

I suppose I must have been happy. Not that the question ever arose, of course. Children are not in the habit of wondering about their own happiness.

What would you like to know?

What good will it do?

Why now?

The old woman's barrage of questions tries to ward off the inevitable. But her granddaughter won't let up. She insists on getting some answers.

The old woman is having trouble finding a sensible place to begin the story, one that won't jeopardize the rest of it.

As far as she's concerned, the story isn't that important to her, and at this late date it doesn't seem to be important to anyone else either. There are many others like this story, including some that have already been told. She doesn't think that hers is any more worthy.

On the contrary, she's convinced that the story will resist her, will become incoherent, and in an effort to disguise its own ugliness will turn into something completely different.

And yet, she is the only one who can tell it. If not all of it or most of it, then at least some parts. A strange sense of urgency overtakes her. Maybe it's old age. She cannot afford to let the story disappear as if it never happened.

I had a mother.

I had a father.

Won't you make do with that?

I loved and I lost.

That's the end of the story. The beginning too.

The old woman keeps on grappling to the last minute, when the doorbell rings, causing the walls to shake.

It's not one of those stories that audiences love. Old Woman, give them something airy, upbeat, with an engrossing plot. The hero ought to be larger than life, that's what her granddaughter tells her. Glamorous, sort of famous, like someone from TV. Despite her age, the old woman knows the new stories, how a story does well precisely when it removes its addressees from their own bleak and compliant place. People have enough on their plate without stories like hers.

The recipients of the new millennium's stories are quick to pass judgment. They've heard enough, so they declare. This story, that story, the world is filled with so many stories. Even those without a story to tell insist on their own snippet. And as long as it's being told, they want the snippet to ring true.

But her story, rotting away in its drawn-out darkness, couldn't possibly sound familiar. Which is why its chances of finding a receptive addressee are all the more slim. Deep inside, the old woman is hoping for a hostile reaction that will wipe out the story once and for all.

But to undo it completely would be impossible.

Besides, she knows that in her case just telling it will take a supreme effort. To try not to undermine it. To continue loving even in those places where the story is devoid of love.

Because once she lets go of it, it will be told differently. People will add things, leave things out, twist it out of shape. And all she has to go by is her own version, her own inadequate best. Deliberately, cautiously, the old woman will pry out spikes from the body of her story, hoping for it to work its way to the surface carefully and discreetly.

As for the brutality of it, she'd better just let that be.

For now.

The girl sits facing her. Her hands are unclenched.

Grandma, tell me.

The old woman says nothing.

Grandma, it's me.

She's still prying out those spikes.

She's not as old as she seems. But since her granddaughter sees her as planted in a world which can hardly have existed, let's just call her "the old woman", though age, at least in her case, is an elusive notion.

In her case, in fact, it is her childhood that is fixated. And not out of nostalgia.

The old woman is the little girl who once was. True, it would take a daring leap of the imagination to connect pudgy little hands to the body as it is now, or to visualize the dimples and the baby teeth. But since the reflection of the little-girl-who-once-was has none of that wistful sweetness to it, we will not refer to her as "that little girl". Whenever the old woman stands in front of the mirror, she searches – and she keeps searching – in the hope of not finding.

I lost it.

I lost everything.

Not everything.

Almost everything.

Patience, Child. Every storyteller has trouble finding the right words, and this particular storyteller is finding it especially hard, since her spikes and the sudden jabs have never before been translated into storytelling language.

That was an excellent pretext for not telling it to the girl's mother, whom the old woman also called "the girl", though it was a long time since she'd been young.

The old woman uses "girl" for all those who've been born to her, including those born to the ones who've been born to her.

How should she begin? Maybe with the beginning that came before it began.

Once upon a time, there was ... – that's the usual format, the proper way of starting a story. Well, once upon a time there was a man and a woman. They met. They fell in love. More or less. They had a daughter. A family. A neat and familiar pattern. How's that for a promising beginning?

Except that the story refuses to be told that way.

Why are they doing this to me?

What did I do wrong?

Why?

That's the whole story in a single word.

A story? The old woman protests. Why call it a story anyhow?

The very word implies something fictional, and may even allow the harsh details to be turned into anecdotes.

But the girl who is sitting across from her won't take no for an answer. It is a story. That was what she was taught. Not just any story, but a first-person account. She's even brought a notebook along, to take it all down. There's a sweet angel on the cover, a commercial print that you see everywhere. Its chin is resting on its hand. Its wings are colorful, and its eyes are looking upwards.

The girl sitting across from the old woman is her granddaughter. Knowing that she herself is going to be seen differently by her young listener as the story unfolds, the old woman holds back. She must not cause the child to age prematurely. She's afraid of changes.

What might have happened if...

What if the girl sitting across from her had been there instead?

It would have been totally different.

Or maybe not.

A home. Her room. There's a window in the wall. A rose-patterned lace curtain. A doll with braids. She'd gone to sleep with the doll under her pillow. In the middle of the night she got up and pulled out the doll, worried that it might suffocate. She told the doll she was sorry.

Her mother laughed.

The granddaughter is disappointed. That wasn't the beginning she'd been hoping for. Some day, when she retells the story, she'll choose a different way to begin it. Her own way.

I loved them.

They loved me.

Those are the foundations.

No, this story cannot be begun with love.

If she'd been asked to give an account instead of telling a story, it would have been simpler. A pre-formatted questionnaire with a clear purpose. She could have given them the dry facts, without having to formulate an argument. The distinct, calculated questions could have helped her remain in control, and anything that she did not want to let out could have been blocked.

As soon as she gave in to her granddaughter's request, she realized that telling this story meant provoking it. She had no choice now. She'd set herself up.

Unable to break free, defeated, the old woman tries to start all over again.

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A big city. There are many like it in Europe. Heavy snow in winter. The river is frozen over. For her birthday, they gave her a pair of skates. In her blue cape she skates without going further than she's allowed, only where the ice is thick. They told her there were fish under the ice, but she didn't see any.

A five-year-old can't take in everything with her own senses.

Who was it that had held her hand to make sure she didn't fall in?

Father. Mother too. Was it the servant? Probably not. Always in uniform: dark blue with a white collar and long sleeves.

Oh yes. The servant. Now there's a beginning that looks promising. The granddaughter settles into her chair and opens the angel-covered notebook on her lap. That's just what she had in mind: everything it takes to make a story, even a servant.

She screamed. She kicked. She broke things.

Why are you giving me away to people I don't even know? I've been good, haven't I? I've done everything you told me. So why are you making me go? My room. My doll with the braids. The window with the lace curtains. The rose-patterned ones. Mother made them.

I love you. How come you don't love me back?

I won't go. I don't want to. I won't.

You're a bad father and mother.

In the end she hit them.

Now she really was a bad girl. She had it coming.

That's how the story really begins.

Her granddaughter cringes. Still, she's determined to go ahead. A poor beginning doesn't necessarily mean a bad ending. As far as the young girl is concerned, the story has a happy ending anyway. The old woman is her grandmother after all.

"And it will end with death." The granddaughter does not record that familiar sentence in her notebook, because that's not how the story ended. At least not this story.

But the threat of untimely death was passed on from birth-givers to those who were born, and turned into a hereditary deficiency. A challenge to scientists struggling for a breakthrough in genetic engineering. The old woman nods, resigned to the inevitability of hereditary defects. She will not play a part in this rewrite.

She continued to resist. Refusing to pack. Not even the doll with the braids. On the last day she wouldn't even eat. Hunger was her last resort. Even at this late date, the old woman makes a point of stressing that she did not go along with her parents' plan. She really did become the worst possible girl in the world. Because if you throw someone out of their home, there has to be a reason. All her mother said was: It's for your own good. And her father told her: It's just for a short time.

Grown-up lies.

Her granddaughter now looks up from her notebook. Up to this point it seemed that she might have been trying to take it all down.

Grown-up lies. An unnecessary slip.

The old woman stops short. The story is begging for a pause in any case. She's worried that her granddaughter will suspect her of not telling the truth, and won't trust her.

She's a grown-up herself after all.

Without trust, the story is in danger of collapsing.

If you throw someone out of their home, there must be a reason.

Such a bad girl.

Unwanted girl.

Too bad she was born.

She had it coming.

She had never been away from home without her parents. Her parents never left her. Even in summertime when they went to the seashore, they took her along. Now she'd have to live without them. To be with strangers in a strange place. Why weren't they taking her with them?

All night long she cried. Her last tears. Her mother sat by her bed, trying to hold her hand. She pushed her away. Anger – that's the scaffolding of her story. The old woman would try her best to keep the venom from splattering onto the recipient of her story. The old woman hadn't chosen her, and there was no doubt in her mind that her granddaughter was hardly the ideal addressee. Had she been allowed to choose, she would have preferred someone indifferent, unemotional, far-removed from her and from the threat of her hereditary deficiency. But at her age, it would be foolish to expect a perfect listener.

When they come to judge her story's tortuous emergence from its darkness, they will dissect the storyteller too. Maybe it could have gone differently.

Maybe it would have been enough to tell just the beginning, and to limit the continuation to an innocuous minimum.

Without hearing all of it, her granddaughter's mother too would question its validity, because to her mind, some stories have to be confined to those who have already crossed the twilight zone separating childhood from whatever follows.

Ever so laboriously, the story moves forward, only to retreat again.

In the case of the old woman and others like her, the hereditary deficiency has reached its quintessence. Her daughter had complained, first behind her back and then to her face. And that too is part of the story, though it is probably part of a different one.

The old woman would also have liked her unbridled story with its warped and twisted spikes to be replaced with something more tame. Had the granddaughter's mother been witness to this conversation as it unfolded on a sunny afternoon in Tel Aviv, she would have been more relentless in her judgment on the art of storytelling than any outside expert.

Don't lay this on us, Mom, she would have screamed. Spare us. So much for this story. Cut it out once and for all.

What is a Jew?

If it's such a terrible thing to be a Jew, why did you make me one?

Papa and Mama, it's your fault. You're to blame that I am what I am. You're the worst father and mother in the world. I wish I had known. I would have chosen to be born to someone else.

Maybe she'd heard the word *Jew* before, but five-year-olds don't give much thought to the words hovering around unless a particular one is repeated

over and over again, and begins to hurtle at a frightening pace.

There were other insults. Once she even spat at her father. He wiped off the wet spot and, much to her surprise, did not scold her. She tried to strike a bargain. She promised to be the very best. She'd never ask for anything again. She swore she'd eat cabbage for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They knew how much she hated cabbage.

They rinsed her hair with peroxide. She thrashed about wildly. The servant threatened to tie her hands together, and eventually managed to hold them tight.

It's so you don't look too Jewish.

If there's such a thing as too Jewish, there's such a thing as not Jewish enough too. She'd already made up her mind: as soon as she could, she would stop being Jewish at all.

If being Jewish was such a terrible thing, then being a Jewish little girl was the worst thing in the world.

There was another word she heard for the first time. They spat out *War* like you spit out a broken tooth. Then they started whispering, as if they'd lost their voices. And even though her lungs were still full of screams at that point, she was already starting to sound like them. First masking her voice, then whispering, and finally utter silence.

If you were going to hand me over to strangers, why did you bring me into the world?

Where is “there”?

Who's going to help me with my homework “there”?

Whose bed will I go to “there”?

And who will be with me “there”?

Who else will be “there”?

Why isn't "there" here?

The old woman rattled off the questions one after the other, the way children do to control what comes next. Now she realizes that this had been her way of reducing her fear, though she can hardly bear to admit that the effort was doomed to fail. Would her granddaughter be able to see through the old-woman shell, and perceive the five-year-old child she once was? Her childish voice reaches out through the cracks in the story. Once she'd been forced into the next stage, the child had trained herself never to speak in anything but a grown-up's voice.

When her strength ran out – how much strength can a five-year-old have? – she whispered: Will you come to visit me? And they swore they would.

Just before they left the house, as the servant clasped her hands with fleshy handcuffs, she asked, barely audible: Will you come to take me back when you can?

And again they promised they would.

The storyteller is supposed to gain something from the very act of telling the story. Release, after all, according to the experts, is supposed to bring relief. The old woman certainly has a hefty motive then. And yet, no gain seems to present itself in the case of her story. The natural act of returning to the past and rummaging through memories brings solace only to those with very different stories to tell. The growing weight of her own story leaves no room for relief. And there's no turning back now either.

Don't turn your back on me, the story seems to be imploring in an almost-human voice. The deeper it was buried, the wilder it grew and the stronger its roots, though the old woman had deluded herself into thinking that she had managed to sever its limbs and eradicate it. Now it is her turn to

implore, to beg her memory to set her free. She needs its blessing if she is ever to be able to emerge from her hiding place.

They stood with their backs to her.

Her mother did not turn around. Didn't say a word. Not even good-bye. Didn't touch her either.

The old woman is almost choking. The story is lodged between her throat and her mouth. She couldn't know that, had her mother made a move – even the slightest one, like holding out a finger or blinking or twitching – everything would have fallen apart.

The granddaughter gets up. The old woman feels that the girl is about to touch her, but as if on an uncontrollable impulse, she turns her back.

For a moment, that seems to be the end, but it isn't even halfway through.

3

They lowered her into a pit under the ground. The stranger, the one whom she would come to call the "farmer's wife", dragged her down the ladder and said, This is where you stay.

The little-girl-who-once-was thought that only the worst creatures in the world lived under the ground. Moles and snakes and worms. And the worst of all were the rats. She was worse than any of them though, if she had to be hidden away from all the people up above.

That's what the old woman thinks she must have been feeling then. But instead of adding to the story, she only seemed to be detracting from it.

Early afternoon in Tel Aviv is always a difficult time of day. The light is invasive. Only rarely does the old woman let herself take it in. Most of the

time, she draws the curtains and shuts the blinds, to let in the darkness, her old ally.

Her mother and father hadn't told her that "there" was in the darkness under the ground. Even the servant, who had shared their secret, had kept it from her. But if the old woman had known ahead of time what lay in store, would it have been any easier for her? Can a person prepare for the possibility of being lowered into a pit under the ground?

The little-girl-who-once-was thought: Maybe I'm really dead. Because only dead people get pushed so deep down.

Why do they call the main character of a story the "hero"? Some people naively assume that it's because the main character gives the story its strength, but the fact that the character happens to be in the centre doesn't necessarily mean he or she will be heroic in carrying the story along.

The old woman's style seems more in keeping with our modern approach – choppy, jumpy, breathless. But it's not because she doesn't have enough time, or because she's eager to get to a point that will be particularly rewarding. Nor does she tell it out of consideration for the reader's impatience.

Her granddaughter is sitting across from her, confused.

Darkness.

This is where the story reaches an impasse. The old woman is finding it difficult to explain darkness to someone for whom it has an obvious meaning, part of the day-and-night cycle, associated with the safety of sleep, of dream life.

At this point in her story-line, she is inclined to give up trying. Her darkness is not about a lack of light nor even a contrast with light. It's a subcutaneous

substance that has mass and weight, and has managed to defy the laws of nature and work its way through every barrier in the human body. Even when she discovered within herself the intention of shedding light on it, especially for the sake of the one with whom she has had children, that intention was short-lived, because she soon discovered that her darkness would not lend itself to reformulations.

This is all she can offer then: I was in the dark. A muddle of time. I don't know when it began or when it was over.

If it was over.

And those are the details of the story, pretending to be ordinary. The creatures who were there in the dark grasped her presence. A rat groped its way in her direction, first sniffing, then biting. She didn't scream. It was she, after all, who had disrupted his routine. Then they grew used to one another. She petted him and he grew fat. The glimmer in the rat's eyes was her only light.

She could not make out her hands or feet. To be sure they were there – she fingered herself, and that's how she discovered the lice, not knowing that's what they were called, these tiny creatures that had set up home in her hair and on her body, being fruitful and multiplying. She picked them off her body and crushed them – the only sound in the darkness. That and the sound of her breathing, which she also learned to emit ever so softly.

Her senses, which had grown sharp almost instantly, began by grasping the subterranean movement. The rotting of the potatoes. The slow progress of the roots. The groaning of the wood in the ladder leading down to the pit. The wheezing of the seeds as they fought to sprout. The drops of rain percolating through the soil.

She learned to recognize the sounds above ground too. The lowing and the growling. The footsteps of cows. The croaking of frogs in a faraway lake. She concentrated on every murmur, deciphering its effects on the world above. Then she translated the sounds into pictures. The hay being stacked

up in the silo. The thrashing of the pitchfork. The neighing of the farmer's horse as it crossed the wheatfield. The farmer lashing out at his wife: What did we need this for, you fool! And for next to nothing too. Jesus, that little Jew is a danger to all of us.

Birds she didn't hear even once. Maybe they were too far away. But planes she could hear clearly. Every time she recognized the muffled hum, she couldn't help thinking of her father and mother, and clinging to their promise. Even if they were the meanest parents in the world, the kind who abandon their daughter, still she wanted to be with them. Every part of her body was aching to be hugged. The anger and the longing blended together. Never would she be able to tell them apart.

The farmer woman was coming down the ladder. She threw down the bowl along with a spoon, and a bucket-toilet, and announced: You're not coming up until you know.

But the little-girl-who-once-was did not know what it was that she was supposed to know.

Twice a day – soup and two slices of bread. That was how she could tell time. Whenever she got very hungry – and she did – she would gnaw at the potatoes. Then she grew worried that the farmer woman would count the potatoes, one by one, and would realize that some were missing. She learned to stick to the moldy ones.

In a rare surge of boldness, she asked: If you hate Jews so much, why did you agree for me to be under your ground?

The farmer's wife said: Just pray that the money arrives. And spat on the ground of the darkness.

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.

The little-girl-who-once-was stammered voicelessly, stumbling over the words. In the darkness, the farmer's wife aimed an expert hand at her cheek and slapped her. You little sinner, she said, say it out loud. How can you expect to learn it unless you say it out loud? We should have asked for more. To think what you cost us.

The farmer's wife took the little hand and made a cross over her body time after time until she was satisfied.

Up above, the farmer was muttering: I've had it. I'm handing her in. Enough of this story.

Muttering – just like her parents. When they spoke about her, they lowered their voices.

She didn't want to become a grown-up. Ever.

The old woman has no illusions. Her story is made of stumps. The chances that it will be mended at this late stage are very slim.

All around her, old people are losing their memory. In her heart of hearts she envies them.

The more the old woman recounts, the more she remembers. And the more she remembers, the less she recounts.

This conversation, on a sunny Tel Aviv afternoon, is becoming intolerable.

The little-girl-who-once-was kept shrinking and shriveling, absorbing the darkness into her. She learned to take up less and less space. To behave like a perfect subterranean creature. Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, Amen.

Once a week, the old woman goes to the doctor, hoping that he will not discover the clots of darkness blocking her blood vessels.

“Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee,” the one who had had children with her would quote the Psalm to her. Pretty words that even she, or so it seemed, could understand. He had never stopped seeking consolation. She had never called him “husband”.

He had been hoping to find an explanation, or at least some meaning. It wasn’t the old woman who had sent him searching. He went of his own accord. Perhaps he felt that of the two of them, it was in fact he who most needed compassion, because he had chosen a wife predestined to see him as someone who would turn his back.

Again and again, he had tried to prove to her that his promises were not false. Eventually, when the time came, he too was lowered into a pit under the ground, though she had to admit that he had in fact tried to say good-bye.

Had she loved him? She’d had children with him after all.

The old woman hesitates before answering this painful question. Granted, she had borne the burden of love, though there was always that fear that the day would come when he too would get up and leave.

And there were other things that her spouse, whom she had never called “husband”, had said to her: “My substance was not hid from thee when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.” The old woman did not want to hear the Psalm. Supplications to heavenly emissaries are the invention of people who take refuge in light. They haven’t a shadow of doubt.

Still, she did devote her thoughts to the word *wrought*, which is no longer used. Had she been able to, she would have reinstated it as a key to the stories yet to be written.

The little-girl-who-once-was kept thinking that even God, whoever He may be, was ashamed of her. Otherwise He wouldn't be hiding her in the dark. Maybe He removed her from the light in the process of Creation just to make sure He did not bump into her. She could not tell whether He was the Father or the Son.

And if in fact He does exist – God is a mother who turns her back.

Why tell the granddaughter?

Why not her daughter?

The old woman's daughter, no longer young and not yet old, had been ruled out as a possible listener to the story. It wasn't clear who had ruled her out. The old woman had kept postponing the storytelling, using a different excuse each time. Somehow it always seemed as if the story could endanger the offspring and maybe even jeopardize the chain of birth-giving. The daughter avoided it too. Maybe she felt that by accepting it, she was liable to be robbed of her mother, who would be superseded by a shattered creature, without a face or an identity. To tell the truth, she attributed otherworldly powers to the story. Anyone who criticized the daughter for shirking the burden of acceptance was ignoring the element of fear that the story contained.

Without fear no story would be what it is.

Now the old woman approaches the danger zone, the limits of control, the place where she would no longer be able to hold on to the story-line.

The footsteps of the farmer's son.

At five she could count already. Up to ten, and one more. Coming down, closer, his legs heavy, the wooden ladder creaking. The ninth rung is shaky. Ave Maria, Holy Mother, make him stumble and crash. But the farmer's son knows about the weak rung, and he treads carefully. She counts till she runs out of numbers.

She doesn't know exactly how old he was. To her he was a man. How could she tell? A breed of giants, mean, deceitful, treacherous.

She never wanted to grow up.

The granddaughter stops.

That's not the story I wanted.

It's not up to you.

But I don't want this story.

This is the only one there is.

It's too late to stop now.

In all innocence, not realizing what lay ahead, the granddaughter has chosen to be the story's addressee. Had she known, she would probably not have volunteered to document it, because the very act of committing the story to paper widens its circle of addressees. Throughout the conversation the granddaughter pretends to be writing, but in fact merely stares at the sweet angel on the cover. Since it was first painted, nearly five hundred years ago, it has managed to generate every possible form of replication. But the granddaughter, like most consumers of paper, has no idea about the artist or about the original painting, and all she can think about is whether the notebook will change as a result of the story. Perhaps this is why she refrains from writing anything down.

You were lucky, they told the old woman.

Even without hearing the story, they kept comparing. And the old woman too could not help weighing her own story against those of others, especially since new stories keep cropping up. But she never felt lucky. She'd smile, pretend to be grateful, and fine-tuned her deceptive front to a fine art. From that point on, the crack in the scaffolding began to show. How true are they, the details of her story? How true do they have to be for the story to count? Since this is the first time the story is ever being told, there is no yardstick for comparison.

The old woman wants to tell her granddaughter that the truth does not depend on the storyteller's will.

Even though she is not making up a thing, the old woman is extra-cautious. She confines herself to what is absolutely necessary, to the parts without which the story would collapse, and she is overcome with despair whenever parts that she did not intend to include leak out anyway. Her laconic speech places her at the bottom rung of the storytellers. Or maybe she is one of those who tell their story best by keeping silent.

4

Stefan, that was his name. The farmer and his wife had all kinds of nicknames for him. Stefcho. Stefaniu. Stefanek. They were his parents. She heard them calling him up above. She could detect the affection in their voices. With her sharpened senses she could detect everything from below. He ate pork sausage, worked on the farm, amused himself with the cats and the dogs. On Sundays he went to church in his finest clothes. The village darling. There was a girl who followed him everywhere. One day she got as far as the mouth of the pit.

Let's climb down, sweet Stefan.

I'll let you touch me. You can do whatever you want to me.

No!

The village girl broke into tears, she was so disappointed. Stefan pushed her away from the mouth of the pit. She fell.

Janka was her name. The spike of that name juts out, so trivial.

Even though the old woman is trying to let the story unfold as slowly as possible, she knows it is hurtling towards the point of no return.

Stefan, what are you looking for down there?

Stefan, where are you?

Stefan???

The farmer's wife, his mother, makes do with calling after him. Soon he'll be married and have children. There will be an heir to the farm and all that goes with it.

Jewish skin, so soft, so smooth.

Jewish undies.

Don't you dare open your Jewish mouth, or I'll kill you.

How could she tell it now?

Either way, it will end in death.

Wrought in the dark. That's the point where the story implodes.

Maybe we should stop?

It's the last chance.

We don't have to keep going.

That's enough for now.

Who said every story has to be told? Who said every story has to see the light of day? Maybe it is precisely the buried stories that are the perfect ones.

The old woman is tempted to rebury it.

But her granddaughter is committed to the story by now.

What's that there between your legs?

Don't you dare cry, you scum. Jewish scum.

Just you wait, and I'll show you.

Soaked in her own urine, in her own vomit, in her own excrement. Hemorrhaging herself. The tears she's learned to stifle, because unlike the other bodily discharges, tears can be a giveaway. Her very life depends on her complete control over her body. Quite an insight for a five-year-old. To this day she never sneezes or coughs.

The blood – that's beyond her control.

Mother in Heaven doesn't know what they do to little girls under the ground. If she did, of course she'd come down to earth, and if she doesn't come down – she just doesn't want to know.

Ave Maria of the Lice.

Ave Maria of the Snakes.

Ave Maria of the Worms.

Ave Maria of the Stefan.

Maria is just like her mother – turning her back.

I'll stick it in your mouth.

Swallow it.

And again, swallow it.

Always swallow.

A human blob in the dark, keeping her breathing to a minimum. In the days that followed, or in the nights, to be precise, she started mumbling the Latin words. Ave Maria, turn me into a rat too. The happiest creature in the world.

She'd always hoped that old age would bring some relief. Above all she'd hoped it would take the edge off the rage. Time had not kept its promise, and her rage remained as razor-sharp as ever, matched in strength only by the yearning. Every day, every hour, her mother turning her back. Even now, when she is forty years older than her mother had been then.

Had the old woman told her story earlier, she might have been able to stifle her anger just a little. So many times she had wanted to forgive her parents, but the rage wouldn't let her. Not even the guilt could take the edge off it.

It is rage that is forcing the story off course. How inarticulate and evasive the story sounds to her as it breaks free of her, removing itself from her grip. As the old woman observes it helplessly, the story keeps egging her on, insisting it has been disabled, and refusing to be hers any longer. But the old woman, sobered and perhaps brave too, won't let it break out of the darkness without a battle. The rage continues to seethe, because without it she would cease to exist.

Her granddaughter is indeed young, but she's already at an age where people are capable of working out the codes and deciphering the truth. And although she's decided to get the story, no matter what, the pages of her notebook are blank.

The old woman marks a little victory. The story is missing its target after all.

Because more than she does want to tell it, she doesn't.

Night after night, or day after day, in the shell of her wilting body, with every sense she possesses, the girl who was wrought detects the steps coming down, approaching, and even in their absence – which isn't to last – she is on the alert, knowing that the Stefan is sure to arrive.

Suddenly the story folds inwards, to its core, where the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

But this is not a Bible story.

Even if we assume that the story is not make-believe, it may well be that its time axis has gone awry. Decomposing time into units and rearranging it – that's no small feat for a child. One night can be an eternity, and what was tagged as the past turns out to be the present. Strange, but only now that old age is gnawing away at her – not simply overtaking her, mind you – does the old woman grow more acutely aware of the twists and turns along the time axis. The elements of the story have been fused into each other, which is why the darkness and the Stefan are liable to take up no more than a small fragment of the story-line, in complete contradiction to their dimensions in reality.

The key points along the way, then, are not shortcuts but time capsules. Darkness. The farmer's wife. A rat. Ave Maria. The Stefan. Darkness. A rat.

The Stefan. Ave Maria.

Darkness.

The Stefan.

Darkness.

Open your Jewish legs.

More.

Much more.

A Jewish hole.

That's what you are.

While she was waiting for her granddaughter, the old woman vomited. It's just the heat, she excused herself. Tel Aviv deifies the light. In this city, light is the be-all and end-all. Her guts were boiling. Even before getting on course, the story is already bursting out of her body.

Her flesh is simply growing slack. Old age, that's just how it is. Even though she'd sworn never to grow up.

I was an old woman before I was a young one, she tells her granddaughter, and asks her not to put it in writing. When an old woman stabs at the child within her, she wastes whatever resources she has left.

Non-memory – that's what she ought to have talked about.

Even in earlier times she'd been unable to put a face to the young man climbing down the steps. Couldn't give him eyes or hair. All that stuck out in the shadows was his name. Stephan. Only with great difficulty did the hazy silhouette of the farmer and his wife appear. She found excuses to avoid the hard labor of remembering, as if the time she'd spent in that

hiding place had been excised. Excised? Who was the surgeon who had done such a good job? The storyteller knows the answer; and the listener can only guess.

How long did it last? How much time?

The word *time* had not been part of her vocabulary, and even if it had been, the little-girl-who-once-was would not have known how to cut it down to size. Without understanding what she was doing, she calculated how many “whens” had gone by since her birthday. The one when they’d given her the skates. A doll with braids on the birthday before that one. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t help thinking that if there had really been any skates, or a doll, or a birthday – they must all have been before she was even born.

How long did it go on?

The silence goes on for so long that her granddaughter figures the old woman hasn’t heard the question.

She hadn’t counted. They told her about it later, after the fact. Her guess was a winter, a spring and a summer, based on the calendar of the earth. New grass had grown over the crack that the rat used to slip away.

If time is calculated on the basis of a person’s expectations of change, her own watch had stopped. Anything beyond the darkness, anything that had come before and anything that might come after, became an illusion.

A big city. Her room. The frozen lake. A blue cape. The hand that had kept her from falling. All those things had disintegrated, to the point where one could hardly believe they had ever played a part in someone’s life. All that remained of her mother was her mother’s back. A locked body-door. All her attempts to conjure up even the slightest bit of her face were in vain.

Her parents’ promise was all that remained. Clear and precise. When she asked the farmer’s wife for the Latin again so that she could pray properly, the woman just laughed.

Dead people can't keep promises.

Now the granddaughter is concealing from the old woman her own joy over memory loss. Her notebook is empty. What a clever girl. It's the blank spaces that kept the old woman from hemorrhaging to death. Luckily, we don't really remember.

Perhaps this crossroad in the story could be titled "Thank the Blank".

An eternal outcast from the world. A walled-off existence. When asked, she'd say simply, "I was a child during the War," to account for the fact that she had nothing to recall. The world keeps insisting on memories, whereas she has a miraculous power of forgetfulness. Even now, there's a cesspool inside her, and into it she tosses the spikes of evil and ugliness. Meanwhile, far removed from those close to her, the story keeps unfolding secretly, of its own accord.

You could say it's been *wrought* inside her.

To think of all the complaints heaped on her by her own child, the one whom she bore and who had given her her share of complaints. The old woman had to be on guard, as if her daughter was the enemy.

The daughter, the granddaughter's mother, always suspected that her mother was obsessively repeating the story to herself. She claimed that whenever a person becomes immersed in a story, he doesn't bother to listen to anything around him. Perhaps she was trying to cry that she had a story too, one that was no less important than her mother's. No one had explained to her that her mother was immersed not in the story, but in the question of how to tell it or to refrain from telling it. If only the old woman really had allowed herself to indulge in self-pity, the story might have come to the fore much earlier. And if a few spikes did somehow come loose nevertheless, the granddaughter's mother was quick to turn them against the old woman.

You're a lousy mother.

You should never have had children.

On that day, the daughter came knocking on the old woman's front door ahead of schedule. The granddaughter who is no longer a girl opened it, and stood facing her, more surprised.

Didn't I tell you I'd be picking you up? Now there was a mother who kept her promises.

When the daughter discovered the notebook, she lost no time trying to gain possession of it. She tugged at the sweet angel. The granddaughter resisted vehemently. She didn't want anyone sharing the story. Not even her mother. Especially not her mother.

Gratified, the old woman watched her granddaughter and told herself: It's the worst traits that are passed on from one generation to the next. That's what she said but what she really meant was quite the opposite.

The granddaughter's mother wasn't the kind of person who gave up easily. If she had not been chosen to hear the story, then no one else should receive it either.

Not everything needs to become known.

Everything has already been written.

Except for what has not been written.

Mother, don't you go messing up my daughter's head.

For the first time on a blinding afternoon, the old woman actually cracked a smile. The realization that the one she had given birth to had become such an expert at survival was gratifying.

5

When the farmer's wife pulled her out of the pit, the little-girl-who-once-was covered her eyes. For a moment, the burning sensation caused by the light reminded her of the illusion of tears, though she would never ever shed any real ones again for the rest of her life.

The farmer screamed to his wife: What a horrible stench! Wash her first.

The girl who once was, was sure she was blind. Couldn't see a thing. The farmer's wife said: Cross yourself. Say thank you. And pulled her into the

church.

They went in, the farmer's wife dragging her along like a sack of potatoes.

Her whole body was itching from the lice.

You stink to high heaven. Even Jesus would hold his nose. Ask His forgiveness.

Emerging from a black pit-box was another Stefan. That's the confessional, the farmer's wife announced. Six years old, the little girl understood they were about to shove her into another darkness. A black figure stuck a head-spike out of the other side of the pit-box.

It's his reverence, our priest. Kiss his hand. The farmer's wife pushed her inside.

The little-girl-who-once-was teetered, stumbled, crawled. Said her first confession to Ave Maria.

Holy Mother, thank you for making me blind. Never again will she see another Stefan intent on doing to her what the Stefan always does.

She didn't have a name for it.

Back then.

The story is between her legs. It must be excised.

Cut it off.

But without giving *it* a name. Not because she doesn't know the exact word. It's just that her granddaughter is so sharp. It would be dangerous to name it. Whatever energy she has left the old woman puts into concealment, because if she utters...

“If.” A tough, unrelenting conditional word, which some people squander, almost like, “What if ”.

What if they hadn’t handed her over...

What if there hadn’t been a servant...

What if there hadn’t been the farmer and his wife...

What if they’d been childless...

What if her parents hadn’t promised...

Promise.

That’s a word that ought to be abolished for all eternity, that should never exist in any story, or beyond.

Outside the black box, the farmer’s son too was kneeling before a gilt statue of a woman.

The girl prayed: Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Don’t let him turn around. Amen.

His face moved and he invaded the inside of her. Her sense of vision was back to normal. The trembling – between her legs and in her other cavities – made all the lice fall out.

The farmer’s wife said, Confess, you little sinner.

Black man, I hope you die.

I hope Ave Maria dies too.

The man in the box pulls some small round wafers out of his habit. Her mouth opens wide with hunger. He puts all of them on her tongue at once.

Little girl, Jesus is your father and your mother now. I don't want parents, she tells the priest. I hope they die.

She avoids the word Father, to bypass the pain.

When he pulled her out, she'd been soaking in her own urine. Excrement was dripping down to her feet. Her primordial sin. The stench overpowered the church, but the priest did not demand penance. The entire content of her body was seeping out under the gilt mother, but the man in black knelt down and wiped it off himself.

A story cannot be stalled indefinitely. It has to draw to a finish. One way or another. When the old woman hears the story being told in her own voice for the first time, she's glad that it shows neither orderliness nor clarity. By translating the story into words through the use of a part of our body, do we necessarily create a new, distorted version of it? If she could, the old woman would have volunteered to have her memory amputated, just so long as it continued to exist outside of her. The old woman wants the story to be known, but without having to be the one who provides it.

There are some things that the old woman does not realize she's withholding. But one thing she omits deliberately. Whenever the doorbell rings, whether expectedly or not, at any time of day, whether early or late.

She walks to the door. As she faces the closed door, the sharpest spike of all jabs into her. Perhaps they've returned. They promised, didn't they? Even though it's been nearly seventy years.

That's something she doesn't mention to her granddaughter. Maybe she's too ashamed, or maybe it's because the rage instantly gives way to unbearable pain. She switches off her eyes, giving in to the darkness. How she hardly breathes as her hand presses the door handle.

It's for your own good.

If only to block the Stefan, her parents should have returned. If they haven't – from wherever they are – it must mean they've shirked their responsibility and don't deserve to be a father and mother, if anyone ever does.

The spikes of memory keep jabbing. There's no point in documenting them in a notebook under the auspices of commercial angels, because the time is very near.

It's for your own good. Prying out that spike would mean destroying the entire fragile structure of the story.

And where was her father when her mother turned her back?

That's not a random spike jutting out either, but a red-hot blade slashing across the entire story. As she continues talking to her granddaughter, the old woman tries to position her father. Was he standing near the steps, or behind the servant? Or maybe he was hiding behind the rose-patterned lace curtains.

Either way, she's been spared that memory.

Every time she travelled abroad, she combed the phone directories for her parents' names.

Don't want to be Jewish any more.

The priest said: Jesus was Jewish too.

The little-girl-who-once-was asked: Is that why they killed him?

The priest did not reply. When he tried to gather her up in his arms, she fled to the cross, bumping into the wood, riveted to the hands bleeding above her. Maybe Jesus throws up too, and urinates or gets so scared he shits. Poor

Jesus. His mother's Jewish. Jews make bad parents. Jesus was the brother she'd never had and never would. Like her, he too stopped being Jewish.

Only Jesus keeps his promises.

The old woman learned to control her laughter because it can be a giveaway, like tears. That was why it is so hard to find any humor in her story. And yet, there has to be a smile once in a while. Every story demands its comic relief. Otherwise even the most hardened listener would panic and flee.

In the dark, she chased after the rat. Shared her slices of bread with him. It was only thanks to her that he grew plump. She'd move her lips to summon him, and he never turned his back.

Before letting her come up above ground, the farmer's wife told her: You Jews, you take up all the places in Heaven. Because of you, we'll all have to go to Hell.

And she roared with laughter.

Ave Maria tells Jesus: Move aside, Son. Too many Jewish children are coming out of their holes, and we have to make room for them. Ha, ha, ha. Amen.

Humor is the only way of undermining the story, making believe that we're standing over its ruins. Even now, the storyteller makes fun of herself: an old woman, spending a blinding afternoon in Tel Aviv, in a room with its shutters closed tight. Paralyzed with fear of what she and her story are inflicting on her granddaughter.

Just so long as she doesn't turn her back on her.

And if it hadn't seemed so ridiculous, she would have let loose the hint of a smile.

Every now and then, on Sundays, she'd sneak out of the house, covering her eyes with oversized sunglasses and take a bus to St Anthony's Church in Jaffa. Along with the hardworking Filipino laborers who've come as far as Tel Aviv for their children's sake, she opens her mouth to receive the wafer.

Later, as they kneel beneath their Ave Maria and ask for her blessing, the old woman turns her back and leaves.

A handful of friends, all of them old like her, are overcome with nostalgia whenever they speak of their childhood, that elusive and magical domain, which people grow ever more wistful about as it grows further away. They wax poetic, and she smiles. To her friends, her smiles confirm that her story, just like their own, justifies all the trite excuses people make for recollections of childhood.

A different storyteller – less involved, more distant might have produced a broader narrative, dwelling on the other protagonists too, preparing the groundwork for their individual versions, and giving them the space they deserve.

If only it were possible to have the vantage point of the rat, for example.

The old woman is worried about how the stories are liable to evolve. In a world where stages are glossed over, with no apparent sequence, one must take into account the possibility of changes and reframings. Whatever the next storyteller adds worries her even more than what he may leave out. The Stefan must never turn into the main character, God forbid.

Must never become the hero.

The farmer's son, who inherited the farm and everything on it, will never divulge the story. If questioned, he will deny it categorically. On autumn evenings, he sits with the offspring that Janka – or some other woman bore him, and thinks fondly of his younger days. Once upon a time in a small village in Europe.

That is what the old man is telling people over there.

As for her name, never once did she blurt it out in the muddle of darkness. She was not even allowed to pronounce it, because if she did, that would be end of her. Maybe that is why, even at this late date, she is incapable of divulging it.

The story won't be told by her again, either in part or in full. This is the first and last time. If ever another version is given, the future storyteller will have to dismantle the time capsules and expose their content. But that won't happen. Dissecting the story into its individual parts under a magnifying glass is not the responsibility of the storyteller but of the listener. From here on in, the story is the listener's. Whether she likes it or not, the addressee will be the next storyteller. And in the case of her granddaughter, concentrating on a particular part – especially on the Stefan – is liable to bury it forever.

For a moment, the old woman feels as if she has not told the story at all, but has merely imagined doing so. And even before her granddaughter gets up to leave, she is overcome with a burning desire to go back and try again, to tell it more smoothly, in a way that would include whatever the little girl hunkering in the pit knows.

Was there any point in telling the story? Could it have been told differently? No matter how it is told, after all, the scaffolding will stand strong. The darkness will remain darkness. The rat will be a rat.

And the Stefan Stefan.

When the granddaughter's mother intruded into the house, the story stopped. The granddaughter insisted on staying. In fact, she just about threw her mother out. And yet, vestiges of the daughter's presence remain in the room, eavesdropping on the story without actually being there.

At a different time in her life, as late as possible, the granddaughter will arrange the story anew. The scaffolding will be the same, and the wall too, but the house will be a different one.

The old woman smiles once again. In relief.

She has a soft spot for the creatures of the night. On summer evenings she sneaks out of the house, crawling on all fours, to look for snails and slugs that have pulled out of their shell. Luckily for her, nobody sees her. She smiles to herself. Don't worry, she has not lost her mind. It's nothing more than a private joke.

Once she walked into a pet shop and searched in the cages for a rat. The salesperson wanted to phone the police. Poor man. No sense of humor at all.

The addressee was born to the one who was born to her, which is why the old woman keeps hoping that the very first time the story is retold, at least, it will remain faithful to the original. And even if the content of the time

capsule is never revealed in full, the spirit of the story will continue to roam. Stories have ghosts too, after all.

When her time comes, the old woman will be lowered into the earth, into the familiar darkness. She's not afraid. Unlike those who find refuge in the light, she has been there. She emerged from the darkness, and has remained in the darkness.

And pretty soon, she'll be going back there. If there is one promise that is always kept, that's the one.

The old woman took her chances, and the granddaughter did not turn her back. Which doesn't mean that there won't be setbacks, but never mind that for now.

Even if the story is devoid of love, the closer it gets to its inevitable ending, something fills it in nonetheless. *To love* – a verb which she uses sparingly – is such a heavy burden. But without it the story would have no meaning. At the end of their conversation, the old woman intends to ask her granddaughter to search for her mother and father on the internet. People say that this net is spreading into the world beyond this world.

Just before the end, the story poses the most complicated challenge of all: how to overcome old age? Because she, of all people, must not change or turn into an old lady. After all, if she changes, how will her father and mother recognize her when they come back? She couldn't bear the thought that the promise might be kept for someone else.

Inside her, it is true, time has become fossilized, but on the outside it has taken its toll.

Darkness falls. This commonplace natural phenomenon has never ceased to amaze her. Sometimes one side is completely dark while the other retains a pale pink haze. But whether she closes her eyes or leaves them open, the old woman meets up with the darkness all at once.

She is standing in the stairwell of a Tel Aviv apartment building, flicking the light switch again and again to keep it on, until she hears her granddaughter's voice from below. An echo rises from the entrance hall, over the old bomb-shelter.

Grandma, I've reached the ground. Good night.

The story should be recorded in full, the old woman hears a voice within her, echoing the public demand to tell it before it's too late. Those who can tell such stories are numbered. But she and others like her will never be the perfect storytellers. All they can offer is the shell. We'll have to settle for that. One thing that the old woman's hands remember well – because a flame burns on in her fingers to remind her, oblivious to the main Memory valve – is the slough of the snakes. Scaly, coarse, refusing to crumble. The little-girl-who-once-was envied the snakes.

A shell of a story, or a slough. No more.

The old woman gave in, and agreed to share a small portion of her story. Not because she thought it would be of use to anyone, but because in her heart of hearts she was hoping to uncover something which she herself had not known before.

Now she regrets having been hostage to the story for so long. The rage and the yearning have deprived her of the ability to express what she was

feeling. And she is feeling so much. At this very moment, in Tel Aviv, the old woman is slithering into herself.

Despite the story.

One time the old woman crossed over and entered the confessional. It happened a few days before her conversation with her granddaughter.

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

For the first time in her life she had said Father. In her conversation with her granddaughter, she would try to say Mother too.

In St Anthony's Church in Jaffa the priest sat behind the screen and did not rush her. In talking to his flock – foreign workers who have come all the way to Israel to provide bread for their children – he told her that an evil spirit once attacked St Anthony, patron saint of the poor and the ailing, the brushmakers and the household pets. The saint lay in his black cave, mortally wounded and mistaken for dead. He lay there all night, but in the morning, by some miracle, he was his old self again.

There was a long line outside the confessional, but still the priest waited for the old woman.

Finally she spoke, asking: What happens to all the sinners for whom no confession has been said, the ones still buried in the dark?

The priest at St Anthony's in Jaffa asked her to switch places. He himself sat behind the screen as a repentant instead of the woman who was wrought. His head came lower than hers, with its hair which had been whitened by old age, not peroxide.

Yigdal Elohim Chai ve-Yishtabach

The living God O magnify and bless,

Transcending time and here eternally.

One Being, yet unique in unity;

A mystery of Oneness, measureless.

Lo! Form or body He has none, and man

No semblance of His holiness can frame.

The priest repeated after her the Jewish confession, recited before death, and begged for forgiveness.

Downstairs, above the old bomb-shelter, the granddaughter had the impression that the old woman had said something more.

Stash.

What's Stash, Grandma?

The old woman fingered the necklace she was wearing and shouted from upstairs: It was just your imagination.

The granddaughter dismissed it, never mind, it really must be her grandma's old age, and closed the open notebook she'd been holding.

The story has subplots and untold portions, but since the afternoon has lost the final vestiges of daylight and darkness is falling over Tel Aviv, the old woman leaves the untold portions suspended in the twilight. This was the hour when she would, if she could, have chosen to die.

There are stories which, like human beings, have a tendency to spill over. This story too contains so many feelings that every tilt, no matter how delicate the angle, is liable to cause it to overflow.

To make sure it doesn't spill over, the old woman does everything she can to contain herself. She doesn't want to be left with nothing, after finally managing to have whatever she has.

Should I turn on the light, Grandma?

Not yet.

But it's dark already.

Almost.

Where are you? I can't see you. Give me your hand.

I need you, Grandma.

Someone ought to intervene and tell the old woman: Hug your granddaughter. Don't ever forget who she is, so you don't get confused. In darkness which is darkness, and in light which is also darkness. Born of you. This is the right sequence. And as for the timing, there is no other. Face to face, hug her. Don't turn your back.

And this too is a possible ending to the story.

Part Two

The Legend

Notebook

40 sheets

60 grams

14.8cm x 20.8cm

Front cover: Angel

Detail from The Sistine Madonna by Raphael

c.1512-1513

Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, Germany

The following day: Tel Aviv, late 1999

I don't have a story, Miri. I'm so sorry. You can flunk me. I know your intentions were good. And besides, I'm the one who put my hand up in class and said that she'd been there. And I admit it, maybe I was kind of trying to make an impression, and you figured there had to be a story there, but I didn't find it, and I swear to you I really tried. I deserve a passing grade for doing that much, don't I? I spent the whole afternoon with her, till evening, and here's the notebook, you can see for yourself, and I was all prepared to take down her story, just like you said, and maybe, much as I hate to say this because you're my teacher, maybe there simply is no story.

She won't even let me call her a "Holocaust survivor". She said survivors are just the ones who've had some miracle happen to them, and my grandmother doesn't believe in stuff like that. And now I don't know what to call her. A Little Holocaust, that's what she said. I swear those were her

words, even though for some reason, I really don't know why, I didn't actually write them down.

I told her: But you did survive, you stayed alive, and I even stressed the word "alive", like you told me to, but she answered right away that it wasn't a miracle, though I suspect she really did expect a miracle back then. And I tried, I swear to you that I tried to get her to start from the beginning so I could get it all down, and I did just what you said to do, because even though you're our history teacher, I know you've studied psychology too, but she just kept mixing things up and getting all confused, even though it isn't like her to get confused, at least not on those kinds of things. And just when I thought she was finally getting on with it, she would stop and clam up, and Then she'd try again, and again everything got stuck, and I couldn't understand where the bug was, and I started losing patience, but still I kept restraining myself, because it isn't easy for them to go all the way back, and we have to be sensitive and responsible in how we draw them out. And the main thing is to be compassionate, though we'll never really be able to understand. That's what you told us. But even trying to listen is worth something.

I tried every way I know. I asked the simplest things, but it didn't work. Because if the story is stuck, how am I supposed to know how to get it free? Unless there is no story, or at least not the story you were expecting.

And I admit that suddenly this whole project is beginning to look pointless, because even though my grandmother really was in the Holocaust, I'm not sure it counts, because she was a little girl and she didn't go through any of the big, horrifying things we learn about in history or read about or see in the movies. If she'd been an adult, or at least my age, then she'd have had a story by now, or half a story, something that could count as a story. But me, all I've managed to get out of her was that they hid her with a couple of farmers in some small village. She couldn't even remember its name because she was so little then, and considering that she can't say anything about a ghetto or about concentration camps, her story doesn't add up to much. And what little I got, which doesn't amount to a story anyway, I could have put in my notebook without having to spend a whole afternoon

at her place, because the tiny bit she told me is stuff that my mother knows too.

And if my grandmother doesn't even remember what grade I'm in, then why should she remember something that happened when she was a little girl with a small memory? Whenever I have a birthday she always messes it up and brings me the wrong present. It's become a kind of family joke, because when I was four, or maybe five, whatever, she refused to buy me a doll, and she and my grandfather even fought about it – he was still alive then – because he'd seen this commercial with a doll where you press its bellybutton and it wets itself. And after a while he even let me in on his secret, that he bought it anyway, but my grandmother took it to the shop and forced them to take it back, even though he hadn't even bothered to take a sales slip.

We had a good laugh over it in the end. And I couldn't help myself: even though my grandfather said it was a secret, it didn't seem to me like such an important secret and I didn't keep it to myself. I mean, I just blurted it out when I was laughing because she'd just come into the room and she saw us, so she started laughing too, because maybe she'd decided that it was silly to fight over a thing like that. I mean, why argue over a doll that wets herself. And Grandpa gave her a hug, which kind of embarrassed me – I mean old people hugging – and she went on laughing because if there's one thing you can't say about my grandmother it's that she doesn't have a sense of humor, although not everyone understands it, especially not my mom. My grandmother, what can I tell you, she like laughs at the weirdest things, like people on talk shows arguing about the meaning of life, or the horoscope telling you what's going to happen to you because some comet crossed the horizon of Mercury while you were being born. And once we were watching TV together and we saw this expert talking about a technique for controlling your thoughts and your feelings, and another expert was telling the studio audience how to release anger and talking about energy points – you just have to press on the right places and you get rid of all the garbage inside. And she thought it was hilarious. She gave this strange laugh of hers. Really quiet, no sound, all you see is the way her mouth twitches, and the little muscles around her mouth. A silent laugh as if it isn't coming from

her throat, or from her stomach, or wherever people usually laugh, but from somewhere completely different.

And I'm telling you, Miri, none of the things you'd expect from someone who went through the Holocaust stuck to her. She's a happy-go-lucky person with lots of friends too. And ever since she retired and stopped working in the x-ray lab at the hospital, she's been going to the theatre every week and to the flea market every Sunday. And she brings back all sorts of junk, especially old necklaces. She has a whole collection hanging on her bedroom wall – she never wears them – and when I was little, she'd let me play with them. And she's not a pain like some other grandmothers. Never tells me off for wearing a belly shirt or for debating between piercing my bellybutton and getting a tongue stud, and she never says: When we were young ... in our generation ... – which is what I keep hearing from my mom, who seems a lot older than my grandma sometimes. Even my friends say that my grandmother is cool, especially after she started getting into computers and announced that she was going to surf the net. I even screamed it at my mother once when we were having a fight, and she screamed back: I'm not in some competition with your grandmother. And I said: Why don't you call her "my mother"?

So what do you want me to write? That she was a little girl and she was saved? That's the whole story. My mother doesn't think there's much to look into either, because everyone who was a child there and who was hidden stayed alive at least, and had someone to care about them – which should count for something.

And what did they get me for my birthday in the end? Not for that birthday, I mean, but for my last birthday – my bat-mitzvah. She insisted on going to the pet shop with me, which sounds neat, even though my mother was against it, because she said animals are dirty and that she had no intention of cleaning up after one. My grandma got really mad when my mother talked about the filth that animals make, but she didn't say a word.

I wanted a pedigree dog, a Pinscher or a Dashchund, or maybe a Siamese cat, but I didn't feel comfortable asking for any of those because they cost a fortune, but my grandmother kept asking the sales guy about snakes and if he knew anyone who raises moles – at home, on purpose – and she asked if

she could touch some worms, but he told her she'd have to go to a fishing place to get worms. He liked her a lot, and thought she was cool, so he let her open the cages. He simply knew he could trust her not to steal anything and not to kidnap some expensive animal, and he watched her when she started petting the hamsters and the gerbils and the guinea pigs, and for a second I got the feeling she was even talking to them, but I guess I was just imagining things. And when she caught the sales guy's eye she winked to him as if they shared some secret, which seemed really odd, considering they'd never met.

Slowly, more people started gathering round, and she began explaining that the most faithful animals are the ones that you never find in a shop. And the sales guy said, You're ruining my livelihood. But he said it nicely and you could tell he liked her, and when we were leaving he said: Your grandmother should have worked in a zoo, and he started explaining, like on Animal Planet, that some people just have a knack with animals and they could be lion tamers in the circus or jungle explorers. And I told him my grandmother could have been Mowgli.

She stood there with her back turned, halfway into the street already, and started laughing. The real zoo is right here, she said and stomped her foot. The salesman told her she was breaking up the Tel Aviv sidewalks, which were in need of serious repairs anyway, and she said that as far as she was concerned, she'd write to the mayor and ask him to remove the top layer of Tel Aviv, and then she'd organize guided tours, because there's a Tel Aviv under the ground too. Every city has an under-the-ground city too, every place has an under-the-ground, because wherever there are people there's an under-the-ground, and even if the under-the-ground wasn't there before, it begins to form because of them, even without their noticing it, behind their backs, and that's the real zoo.

The salesman told her: If you've got nothing to do when you retire, why don't you come work for me, or for the SPCA, because they're always looking for volunteers, and she said: Thanks, I've got lots to do, especially now, while I'm taking a special computer course for mature adults, and learning about the internet too.

But when all was said and done, she didn't buy me anything.

When we got home she said: Your pet will find you. And I said: Come on, Grandma, what animals ever choose their pet-human? But she didn't answer, and I thought, there goes another lousy birthday.

Believe me, it wasn't easy to pin her down to arrange for us to meet for this school project. Every time I tried to set a time with her she avoided me. She had plenty of excuses. She had to wait for the computer guy to hook her up to the net. It was only when I told her that I was going to flunk on her account that she gave in. In the end, we made a date for the afternoon, and I even skipped drama class for this interview. I sat there across from her, all ready to go, if you get my drift, with my pen and notebook, just waiting to hear her out. Just like you said. And I had my outline ready and the list of questions I'd typed out at home, and I thought about what you'd said in class, that this is the eleventh hour because these are the last witnesses who can still tell us firsthand about what they went through in those terrible, horrible years, and pretty soon they won't be around any more. I remembered that you said we should try to bring along a camcorder or a tape recorder to tape the story, but my grandmother just wouldn't have it. She barely agreed to the notebook.

The first thing I noticed was that she'd made room for a computer in the living room near the window. She said they'd promised to hook her up within a day or two, and she was still waiting. I thought it was kind of funny to see people her age surfing the net.

I waited patiently for her. First she drew the curtains, even though the light never disturbs me. Then she straightened up the sofa and the propped-up cushions she'd made out of silk and lace, with embroidery in lots of colors that she collects from all over the world or buys at the flea market on Sundays. Finally she chose the armchair directly across from me and sat down, even though it was my grandfather's chair, where he'd sit with the remote control and wind up watching just the sports channel. It was the armchair he died in, in fact. He got a heart attack all of a sudden, and took us all by surprise.

There was a bit of a distance between us, so I had to bend down to see her face. She sat there in a strange position, like a school-girl, or as if she was facing someone who has made her bow to him and even though she had to

obey, there was something inside her that succeeded in resisting. I didn't feel comfortable in that position. I kept thinking that I don't want to upset her, and that if I just do what you told me, the story will come out clear and smooth, with a beginning, a middle and an end – and a sense of progression to boot. That's what you explained in class. You really explained it well, Miri, and you know I'm not one to butter up my teachers. I thought a lot about the way you put it, and about how one thing leads to another. Otherwise things don't make sense, because the biggest danger is when everything gets confused and chaotic. And I did whatever I could. I thought your instructions were really super, and that if I followed them, I wouldn't cause her any unnecessary pain, because I certainly don't want to do that, especially now that my grandfather is no longer alive.

My grandma asked: What did you bring that notebook for? I've got nothing to tell you. A few words and that's all. Why don't you try someone else?

I said: I don't have anyone else.

And finally she said: Darkness, a pit, potatoes, and then the War was over.

I had a feeling she was a little mad at me then, but I didn't know why, and I figured I was tiring her out, using up her time, which may be very precious to her, because old people really don't have enough time, and I may be getting on her nerves with my school project, the one I have to do to get a grade, and that it wasn't fair to make her go back to when she was so little, because a little girl cannot control her life when she's so small, or tell herself in advance that some day this will become the most important and significant thing in her life. Even I myself, seven years older than she was then, I can't know what will become important in the end and what will fly right out of my memory as if it never happened. And she said: What a shame Grandpa isn't alive, because he had an amazing memory, and now that she was taking the special mature adults computer course, she realized that he was hooked up to the memories of others too.

I became nervous as hell, partly because my notebook was still empty and partly because I'd been so worried about having to listen to all sorts of horrible stuff. But now I wasn't so worried any more because I understood

it wasn't going to be that kind of a story, and deep in my heart I was grateful that she'd been too little, back then.

I didn't succeed in getting the names of the farmers who saved her either, and believe me I did ask, as tactfully as I could, just like you taught us in class. I even remembered some of the examples you put on the board.

What did you call them, Grandma? And I made some suggestions too, just to jog her memory, if there really is such a thing as jogging someone's memory. Maybe she called them *Auntie* and *Uncle* for example, because I figured that maybe her parents had told her they were taking her to some relatives. Or maybe there were nicknames, which would seem logical for a little girl. And for a moment I thought maybe she'd called the farmers *Mother* and *Father* but I didn't dare mention it to her.

But nothing worked. I'm sure she tried, because there's nothing she wouldn't do for me, so she says, and that's what my mother says too, bitterly sometimes, and I think she may be a little jealous of me.

And I used to think that old people are really good at remembering things that happened to them a long time ago, but they're perfectly capable of forgetting what they had for breakfast that day. Then again, maybe that's just a myth, and maybe people can control their memory and keep rearranging it the way you arrange your school schedule and decide what to take at what hour, and they're also the ones who decide when the bell should ring and maybe they keep deluding themselves into thinking that memory is just one big free-for-all. Even I know there are things that I'd rather not remember, but it doesn't help me much. Maybe some day I'll figure out a better way, to push memories aside.

Grandma said she wished she had more control over her memory, but that unfortunately you don't always remember what you should, and vice versa. Then she said: Don't feel too bad. It's not such a great loss.

But I did feel bad actually, because people who saved a little girl deserve to be remembered, and I even felt sort of annoyed with her, because the least their survivor could do is to remember them, even if she doesn't like being labeled a "survivor". It seemed so unfair not to remember the people who helped you the most, but I hid this from her because I was sure that not a

day went by when she did not try hard to remember them but that it just wasn't her fault that she'd been so little.

Believe me, Miri, you're my favorite teacher, and I wouldn't lie to you. I tried everything. I asked her to tell me about that place under the ground because I have no idea what a potato pit is. We don't exactly keep potatoes under the ground, you know. In our house, they're in the vegetable bin in the fridge. And if it was some kind of a basement, then the only basement I know is the old bomb-shelter in Grandma and Grandpa's house in Tel Aviv, which nobody uses, and the city closed it after one of the wars, I don't remember which one, and there's a warning sign hanging there.

She said: A pit. Just a pit. As if a pit that you lower a little girl into is the most ordinary thing in the world. And for me a pit is a hole in the garden where you plant a flower or a tree – not a place you live in, not even temporarily. I mean, it must have been something special that the farmer and his wife had prepared in advance. Maybe they even planned it together with her parents to make it look just like her room at home so she'd hardly notice the difference and would feel comfortable right from the start. With a bed and a carpet, and a cupboard maybe. Because I bet her parents sent all her clothes and her games and toys with her, and her doll of course. And there must obviously have been a flashlight or a lamp, because there had to be some light down there.

But no matter how hard I tried, she kept insisting: a pit. No more.

I went back to the notebook. I was getting really desperate, because I couldn't understand why she was getting so hung up on the wrong word, though I'd always found it really funny how she mixed up all sorts of things and didn't always know what went with what. Like for instance she used to say, "come on up downstairs" or "come on down upstairs". And my dad, last time he came for a visit, said there was no point in trying to correct her because it was her own special sense of humor. Except that now I didn't think it was funny at all. I looked at the questions I'd prepared, and saw

they weren't worth anything, and I had no choice but to start making up new ones.

I asked her how she'd gone up and down, and whether there'd been stairs, and I even imagined a special tunnel that the good farmers had made to take her out for a breath of fresh air, or to take a walk late at night or whenever they thought it would be safe. And I guessed they must have told the neighbors they were raising the poor orphan of a relative, who had nowhere to be because of the War. Of course they only confided in neighbors or close friends that they knew they could trust. And I got the feeling that all my guesswork about her life there was right on target. And the fact that there really are such good people in the world is pretty encouraging, because all you see on TV is people who do really horrible things. And I wish I could have gotten her to remember the names of those farmers, because then I might have written to thank them, even though I'm pretty sure they're no longer alive, or at least I would have written to their children or their grandchildren, and I would even have contacted the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum, and told them that I'd tracked down some Righteous Gentiles. That's what I was thinking. About how unfair memory can be, and about how memory didn't give a damn, and about what a shame it was that I hadn't thought of asking her about it earlier. I was even more upset that my mother never bothered to find out all these details when Grandma was much younger and her brain was much sharper, because then I might at least have been able to hear the story from my mother – organized and clear, with a beginning, a middle and an end. And it just isn't fair towards the people in that village that even its name has disappeared from her mind, though of course it wasn't her fault. And it wasn't that she was ungrateful, it's just that she'd been too little.

She said she never ever left the pit. Only the rat did. And that's how I found out about the rat.

And you know that I'm not one to give up easily, so I took down my grandfather's old atlas, the one with countries that don't actually exist any more because they've been split up, and I asked her to find the place. I even put my finger on the map. My finger moved from country to country, cutting across borders in no time. I flew across all of Europe and even

reached Asia by mistake. I deliberately pointed to the tiniest countries in the world, the ones that you couldn't see without a magnifying glass, like San Marino and Andora and the Vatican in the middle of Rome, just to prove to her that it's possible. But she said she was no good at geography and couldn't pinpoint the place. So I said it didn't have to be the exact spot. Even something in the general area would do, and she said: Let's just forget it, sweetheart, it won't work. Still, I took her finger – she has long nails, and a nice manicure, with nail polish and everything – and tried to place it on the old atlas, but she said that maybe the place didn't even exist any more or that it never had existed because everything was changing anyway at the end of the millennium and none of what had existed before would continue to exist in the next millennium, and that word, "millennium", sounded strange coming from her, even though you keep hearing it all day on special sales and stuff.

And then she pulled a fast one on me. She moved the atlas and took the notebook instead. She opened it and leafed through it, looking at the cover and asking where I'd bought it.

I said it was from an ordinary stationery store at a back-to-school sale, nothing special. I'd bought a whole stack of them, to last me all year. And she asked if I liked angels. I said it didn't matter what they had on the cover. You throw the notebook out anyway when it's full and finished. I don't even wait till the end of the year sometimes. I throw them out right away when they're used up and I don't bother keeping them as souvenirs. She looked at the cover again, checking it out as if she was still an x-ray technician and hadn't retired.

I said the whole business with the covers was just a fad, and that as far as I was concerned they could put Britney Spears or Winnie the Pooh or the Fox Kids announcer on the cover, and the angel was just by chance, though I had to admit that whenever I got bored in class I'd give it a moustache or add some tattoos, and I'd erase the wings completely, really give it a workup. He's really smart, that angel, having the time of his life, though I guess angels don't have such a thing as time anyway.

She leafed through the notebook and I was sure she was going to make some comment about how I hadn't written anything down, but she actually

seemed happy about that.

I tried a roundabout approach, and asked her what language she dreamed in, and she said that some people never open their mouth in their dreams, they keep quiet all through the dream, and then she said she doesn't dream at all. I said that was impossible, because everyone dreams, even people who don't realize they're dreaming. Especially those who suffer from nightmares. Even babies dream inside their mothers, according to scientists. And she said that some people have all their dreams at once. I told her that would be a terrible waste, spilling it all out in a single swoop, because then there'd be nothing left, and you have to save one dream for emergencies.

She didn't say anything. And I thought maybe even the single dream that she must have had at some point had been used up already, which would really be a shame.

Then she left me for a moment, to the bathroom or something, I don't know, and I heard her coughing. I don't know if it's a cold or something that old people get, but it scared me a little, because I don't want her to die, like Grandpa, even though my mother keeps reminding me that it's bound to happen.

Meanwhile, I took down Grandpa's old dictionary from its spot next to the atlas. The pages were so old they were falling apart, but that's all there was, so I opened it and looked up *memory*.

"The power of the soul to recollect things and not to forget them."

I gave it some thought, and realized that if I gave her mind the power, I'd be like some kind of battery pack, like an electrical supply, and that maybe whatever ought to be remembered will be, and I wondered whether my own mind had enough power to give to someone else, and how can you measure the power of a person's mind anyway?

Then she came back, and I asked her if she was OK, because she looked kind of pale under her make-up, and I couldn't quite figure out why she had to put on make-up on my account, because I saw right away that she'd put on a new coat of lipstick, and some rouge too. She said it was just because of the heat, but she didn't fool me, because I saw that she was fingering one of those necklaces of hers, moving the beads back and forth. I felt like I was

being hypnotized, and I even counted them between her fingers. Forty-one beads. Then she noticed the dictionary open on the table and put it back in the right slot on the bookshelf, next to the atlas. She was standing with her back to me when she said: I was a champion ice-skater.

For a moment I thought she was talking about that one dream that we'd been discussing earlier, a beautiful dream. I wish it had been mine. And then she moved Grandpa's armchair, pushed the sofa aside, rolled up the carpet, kicked off her shoes and just like that, barefoot, she started sliding across the floor tiles. She took some real spins and axels, like a pro, as if she'd spent her whole life practicing. I started laughing out loud, not like she did. I asked: Grandma, what do you need the internet for? I'll buy you some inline skates for your birthday, with my birthday savings. Just let me know when your birthday is.

That's when she sat down on the floor, took my hand in hers, and said: Sweetheart, I don't know when my birthday is.

But doesn't everyone know when their birthday is, and when people celebrate it, and what presents they used to get? So how come she doesn't remember hers? Where will I find the power for her mind, so she can remember such a simple thing, which means a lot to me...

And when she saw how much it upset me, she tried to make it seem like nothing. It's just like any other day, and you can always celebrate it on a different date.

What different date?

One when something just as important happened.

Like what?

Maybe it was the day when her parents returned, but they didn't return. Or the day when the farmer and his wife said good-bye and they must have soaked her with their tears because they were practically her parents by then – foster parents – and I'm sure it must have been terribly hard to give her up after they'd saved her life and they'd grown so attached to her. I know they must have loved her. That much I didn't need to ask.

And now I understood that I didn't even know how old she was, and maybe she didn't know how old she was either. It wasn't her exact age that I cared about, but to this day I can't take my birthday casually. I mean, it's the day when I came into the world, the happiest day in my father and mother's life, and I couldn't understand why she was playing down the significance of her birthday. I mean, she remembers mine and my mother's and everyone else's in our family, even though in the end she didn't buy me a pet for my bat-mitzvah, or anything else for that matter.

And even though I didn't say a word, she mentioned the rat again.

A rat?

He was with me, she said. Her voice was soft.

I shuddered.

What a repulsive animal, disgusting as they get. What a nightmare, living with a rat, spending days and nights with it. I would never have lasted.

Believe me, Miri, I changed the subject as quickly as I could, because that rat must have been a nightmare for her. I didn't even manage to think of a single question I'd prepared, and I forgot every one of the headings in my outline. I don't know why I wound up asking her what language she'd used with her parents, when I don't even know what their names were, and now they've been lost forever.

And I was sorry I'd brought it up, because you can't replace an old memory with a newer, smarter one, with more gigabytes, the latest fad.

Still, she answered.

She said it was a language that people don't use any more, like those ancient languages, Sumerian and Accadian for example, that have completely disappeared, and that she'd gotten used to not being able to remember the words. Darkness was what she could feel.

Darkness even had a taste, my grandma said. And when the sunlight disappears for good, maybe I'll teach you to feel it.

Maybe.

Her fingers stretched and moved, as if she was feeling something. It seemed to me that she was holding something that I couldn't see but she could. kept quiet.

To feel darkness.

I'm not so sure I'd like that.

So what did they tell you when they sent you away?

Be a good girl.

I thought she was imagining things, because parents couldn't possibly say that to their daughter just before they sent her far away. It's much more likely that they hugged her tight and soaked her with their tears, and maybe that's why she prefers laughing. To tell you the truth, Miri, I've never seen my grandmother cry. Not even at my grandfather's funeral. She stood tall and looked right into his grave, even when my mother completely went to pieces and really embarrassed me with her screaming and my uncle Nachum had to keep her from falling. To tell you the truth, just between you and me, sometimes I think Mother loved Grandpa more than she loves Grandma, because she never stops grumbling that Grandma doesn't care about anyone but herself, as if she's the only person in the world. And I've told my mother that maybe it's because she was in the Holocaust, and Mother said: What did she go through, compared to the others? And it made me feel awful. I don't like it when people say "compared to", because when it comes to suffering, some people suffer more and some suffer less, but there's no way you can measure it. And it reminds me how people tell me I'm a fortunate kid because I've got a computer and CDs and a neat stereo set and unlimited internet access, when there are kids in the world who work from morning to night in some stinking sweatshop, just to glue the soles onto my Nikes.

And my dad came to the funeral too, even though he and Mom got divorced when I was six, because he really liked Grandpa. He flew in all the way from Palo Alto, where his hi-tech company is located. His new wife didn't come, though. And when he saw Grandma standing so close to the grave, he simply pulled her away from there, but gently.

I told her: Don't you trust me? I'm a big girl, and I can take anything. We're a different generation. We see it all, we know all about things. We're the kids with TVs and computers, and nothing's hidden any more. You can see the worst atrocities live on TV, even on the family channel. Planes crashing and people cutting each others' heads off or doing drugs, and buses exploding. What could she possibly tell me that I don't already know?

Sure, she had it rough. I'm not stupid. They stuck her in some strange village, with people she'd never met, and it must have been difficult to learn how to get along with them. I guess the farmer's wife was a little hard on her, to make sure she got used to the place as soon as possible, so she could play the role of their orphan-relative. And I guess she got used to those farmers, whether she liked it or not, because what choice did she have? And it's just as well that she was so little, because I think little kids adapt to new places quickly and figure out how to do what people tell them to do, till they wind up feeling it's the most natural place for them. Take me, for instance. Didn't I get used to my parents being divorced?

And my dad didn't even come to my bat-mitzvah...

So she was really lucky not to have to see her father and her mother being killed. It freaks me out just to think what she might have had to go through if she'd stayed with them. Her parents simply sent her away "till the storm lets up", and saved her from having to see all those horrors.

I asked what games she'd played and what songs the farmers had taught her, and I hoped the question would help her remember some scenes from the village, which was probably very pretty, with forests all around and snow, and I could even picture her with a red bow in her hair and a white pinafore and a wicker basket, like Little Red Riding-Hood, picking flowers and fruit like the little girls in stories always do. Raspberries or blueberries. Shame we don't have them in Israel. It's a scene I even described out loud because sometimes just describing a scene like that can give your memory a kick in the stomach, so it finally wakes up. Smells do it, at least for me, though I couldn't describe a smell this time.

There was another picture that I tried to describe to her. Of her with the other children.

Did the farmers have sons and daughters?

Did you make friends with them?

Did you play with them?

They were like your own brothers and sisters, weren't they?

And it didn't help when I tried names of games like catch or hide-and-seek. I don't know if they played those games then anyway. Suddenly she seemed so helpless, though I'm sure that if she realized I was feeling sorry for her she'd have been really mad.

And when I saw that she couldn't even remember the farmers' children, I realized it was a lost cause. I couldn't bring myself to ask her when she'd begun to forget her real parents, even though that was one of the questions that I'd written on the first page of my notebook, and I'd even marked it as the most important one.

I hid the notebook from her.

I thought to myself that at that age she must have forgotten really quickly, which was lucky for her, because if anyone stuck me at my age in some godforsaken place I'd never forget it, but maybe that's because my memory works differently and I never forget anything, which is something I have inherited from my dead grandfather.

I consoled myself: it's a pretty good story, even though it's kind of short, without anything horrible, with good characters and with my grandmother who saw the nicer side of life, and it's just my lousy luck that I can't write the story and get a hundred, because that's the grade I would have gotten if I'd been able to produce a story like that after we kept hearing only awful things.

And it was only much later that I noticed that I was the only one who was using the words *Mother* and *Father*...

I was about to get up, and then she said: Come, let me tell you a legend.

Why a legend? I asked. I'm not a child, and I'm not some kind of retard who needs to have everything painted rosy, with lots of soft edges that have nothing to do with how things really were.

I'm too old for legends, Grandma, I told her. Besides, our generation doesn't go for legends. Except maybe for babies who believe in happy endings, and take it in along with "and they lived happily ever after", which is the biggest lie in the world. So why was she treating me that way?

And then she said that some legends are horrible, and I said: Yes, like Hansel and Gretel with the witch who's about to eat them up, or the ugly dwarf with the long name who wants to kidnap the miller's daughter but then she pulls a trick on him. As long as we're into legends, it should only be the kind that involves retribution and a chance to even the score, because if I'd been Hansel and Gretel, I'd never have forgiven the witch, and I would have run after her and caught her and shoved her in the oven and stood there watching the smoke and even burned down the gingerbread house till there was no trace of memory left of it. And as for the miller's daughter, she wasn't that little, so she didn't forget anything, and she taught her kid – who stayed with her for good – never to believe what people told him, and to watch out for monsters in disguise, and how lucky we are that there weren't any dwarfs left in the world, because there were more than enough mean people already, so there's no point in inventing all sorts of nasty creatures besides.

Why didn't my grandma tell the farmers that the rat was bothering her? Or else, maybe they did try to trap it and it kept coming back, because rats are such disgusting parasites, and a little girl makes the easiest prey. I felt really sorry for her. Of all the animals in the world – a creature like a rat! It must have been hell. How gross. What a filthy animal. Makes you want to throw up. I remember when the caretaker at school found a rat climbing on the drainpipe one day last spring, and got the principal and all the teachers to come. We stopped class and the principal kept screaming. You couldn't tell if she was screaming because she was angry or because she was scared. The rat must have come from the sewer. Anyway, they sent us home early that day. It was before you came to teach at our school. So they called in the sanitation workers from the municipality with masks and toxic stuff, and they disinfected all the cesspools around the school and on the whole block. All because of one rat that they saw on the drainpipe for half an hour.

Daniel who sits behind me said that maybe the rat was more afraid of us, but that's because Daniel always turns things around, just to feel superior.

And my grandma had to put up with that rat much longer than a single day. It wasn't a pit, it was a lair...

She must have screamed, poor thing, and they probably had to calm her down. The farmers, I mean, and I hope it didn't bite her or give her some horrible disease like the plague or typhus, because in Bible class when we read Samuel I, I remember the part about the Philistines who captured the Holy Ark, and when they gave it back they put some golden rats inside. As a penance, our Bible teacher told us, to rid themselves of the plague that God had afflicted them with. We even had a test on that chapter, and I remember the verses because I felt sorry for the Philistine artisan who had been forced to make a statue shaped like a rat, and I even wrote the word *disgusting!* in bold print, and the teacher almost gave me a zero and wrote a note on my paper. After class she called me in and said I didn't have enough respect for our sacred forefathers and said I ought to apologize, but I didn't. And my grandmother had to be locked up down there with that ugliness – it's one of the eight vermin that cause the desecration of humans and dishes. That's what it says in the Talmud. And I'm quoting the exact words that the Bible teacher used, even if she thinks I don't remember the material. And it's a creature that multiplies very quickly, and lives deep inside the guts of the earth and only comes out at night to do its ugly stuff. That's what my grandmother had to live with.

I felt sick.

You see, I do remember, Miri?

The farmer's wife did try to get rid of the rat, probably to protect my grandma, even though they couldn't yet hide her above ground in their own house, because it would have been too dangerous. So the farmer's wife took a piece of paper and wrote: "I hereby order the rat living in this place never to do anything bad to me. And if you ever come near me again, I swear on the Mother of our Lord that I will cut you in seven pieces."

Then the farmer's wife put the note over the pit, before sunrise. And for this in itself I'd like a chance to thank her, if only I could find out her name. The

note my grandmother did remember, but not the name.

And I wanted to hug her, but that's when she turned and faced me unexpectedly, and suddenly she seemed so far away that I didn't try any more.

Maybe it was just a certain mood, or maybe it was the wrong timing, or maybe I'd asked the wrong questions. And maybe she's suffering from some unusual disease, not amnesia where people get all confused and don't recognize the ones they love or get lost in the street, but something that scientists haven't even started studying yet so they don't even have a name for it. Maybe "surplus memory" is what she has, and maybe that's why it jams up and gets stuck. The idea that memory may have a will of its own suddenly gave me the creeps.

I looked at my empty notebook and realized that I didn't have a thing – no story, no testimony, nothing that could be used to teach the coming generations a lesson, which is what you teachers are always after, and I knew that it was due the following day and that the whole class had already put together a tree and a genealogy and that they have everything they need, and I don't have a thing.

She insisted: Just a legend. Take it or leave it.

I don't understand where that legend idea came from, because she's not one of those grandmothers who tell you a bedtime story or sing you a lullaby. I can't remember so much as a single story or even half a lullaby that she ever ... just Grandpa. He was the perfect storyteller. He used to say it was for all the ones who weren't able to tell, and he meant her.

OK, a legend. Whatever.

I had to go along with it. Otherwise I wouldn't have had anything to hand in, because if this was all I could get out of her, then either it's a lack of talent that I've inherited from her, or else I just don't have the patience or the technique.

One name at least. That's all I wanted. Damn you, memory. Just give me a name! I was absolutely begging for it in my heart.

And suddenly I had an awful thought, the worst. Maybe she can't even remember her own name, the one her parents gave her. I'd rather not think about what if the name I know her by isn't even—

So what is real anyhow?

Just at that moment, the doorbell rang.

Grandma got up. Slowly. She was tense.

Who could it be?

I didn't understand why she was so nervous. I said, Maybe it's just someone collecting for the blind or for disabled children. Those people never tell you in advance.

She leaned on the wall, right where she'd made room for the computer. And she started to cough. She covered her mouth.

I asked if she was expecting anyone?

She didn't answer.

Maybe they're finally delivering the computer?

She didn't move.

Should I get it? I asked.

The doorbell rang again, and I didn't bother waiting for her answer any more.

It was my mother, even though we hadn't arranged for her to come pick me up.

Mom said: I was worried, so I came to pick you up. Then she tried to grab the notebook away from me.

I told her I'd be back whenever I was ready. I promised.

I think you're too young for this, my mother said. This project can wait for high school when you're older. I'm going to file a complaint against your teacher. Don't you dare, I told her.

My mother said: You're still a child. Don't you understand that? What's the rush? Why grow up before your time? Where is everyone running to? Your generation has no childhood left. I feel sorry for you kids.

You don't get it, I told her. Our childhood – it's not up to us. The world has changed.

She pleaded with me to come home. She said Grandma would understand. Let me explain it to her.

You're spoiling everything, I told her. You're always spoiling everything. I wouldn't let her in. I nearly pushed her away.

In the end she turned around and started down the stairs, turning her back on me. And as she walked down she said: I can't even tell if what we know about her is what she really is, and maybe it's better that we don't know, because I don't know what it could have done to me ... to us ... maybe destroying everyone's life.

That final sentence reached me as a little echo from the floor below.

When I came back into the room, Grandma was determined.

A legend.

Or nothing.

All right then. I had no other choice.

So if this project is a disaster, I take full responsibility, Miri. At least I've brought in a legend, and maybe it's worth a passing grade. It's all she gave me. As far as the rest is concerned...

I don't know.

Just a minute, Miri, one more thing, before you decide about me. I almost forgot. I think – I mean I'm not sure – that I did manage to get one name out of her.

Stefan.

I think that's what she called the rat.

My grandmother's legend goes all the way back to the story of Creation. But her Book of Genesis is different. It starts on the fifth day, when God created the animals. We know all about that because it's all there in writing. And He gave them all their animal traits. That much we can figure out even if it isn't written in the Bible.

On the seventh day, after God had created man and had a chance to rest a little, He was ready to go back to work, because He realized He hadn't put the final touches on His successful start-up. Despite what it says in Genesis He really was a pretty hardworking God. Can't take that away from Him. The thing that was on His mind was how to upgrade man, because He'd already figured out that He'd gone about it too quickly and probably messed it up.

I'm not saying it was His fault.

The following Sunday, exactly one week since He'd started creating the world, God was working His ass off again, if you'll forgive the expression, to work out a program that would provide man with a set of human features, because He thought it would all amount to some sort of improved version. Which is how man developed jealousy, a contagious fast-spreading human trait. That's what my grandmother says. After barely a day, all the animals were lining up, clamoring for the same traits that man had got.

God told them: You've already got one human trait, and not just any trait, but jealousy, the epitome of human traits. But they wanted something more.

God in my grandmother's legend isn't only hardworking, but generous too, which is why he agreed to let the animals have weeping too. To this day the female turtle cries when she lays eggs on a lonely beach on a summer night, and cats and dogs cry after mating, except they do it without tears.

All of the animals were pleased. Crying agreed with them. Only the rat wasn't satisfied with what God had given him and didn't give any thought to what God had taken away. The rat didn't want to cry. It had the audacity – a trait you get directly from God – to confront the Almighty and to demand the ability to laugh instead.

Grandma stressed the word *laugh* as if it were something completely foreign.

God was surprised. After all, in the world he'd created underneath the earth, this silence was his greatest achievement. He'd really gone all out to make it happen. Unlike above ground, when you were underneath, you could hear the roots growing or the drops of water being absorbed. That's what God told the rat, and He was definitely proud of all He'd done.

But the rat didn't buy it, and he still insisted on asking God for laughter.

My grandma was talking so quickly, as if she was afraid she wouldn't remember the legend. I told her: Grandma, I can barely get it all down, but she pretended not to hear me.

God told the rat: I've given you teeth to gnaw with, and claws to dig tunnels, and a wonderful sense of hearing and a highly developed sense of smell. These are all excellent traits in general, and for rats in particular. God couldn't understand why the rat kept wanting more and more. He hadn't made the rat greedy.

But the rat was extremely stubborn, just like God, and he didn't give up. He just kept insisting "I want", "I've got to have" – which is how God figured out that the rat had been given a surplus of human traits.

God said: The snake doesn't have laughter, the mole doesn't have laughter, the worm doesn't have laughter, and you're a subterranean creature just like them. Why should you be different?

So the rat decided to try a new tack, and he started begging. Because he really did want to laugh, at least once.

And he pestered God so much that God, who just wanted to get back to work, because now he was really keen on fixing some of the glitches in his creation project – he'd figured out by then that some of the things were beyond repair – and because he wanted to get rid of that pesky rat, said: So long as you don't hear some other creature laughing beside you underneath the ground, you will not laugh.

And then God decided it was time to throw that subterranean animal out of Heaven, once and for all, and He figured that the rat had a short memory and wouldn't remember the promise.

OK. I closed my notebook. I thought that was the end of the story. It sounded like an ending.

Memory cannot be put into words, my grandma said. Throw your notebook away. But I held onto it anyway, clutching it on my lap, though my knees were shaking.

She continued. Time marched on, because the progress of time is the most fundamental law of that first Creation and no laughter was heard under the earth. The rat kept looking for laughter in his pit. Nothing. Then he dug tunnels under the whole earth, and discovered lots of other pits. He saw dead people resting, some with a peaceful expression, others looking tormented. But they weren't laughing, because dead people don't laugh.

My grandmother added that maybe there are some dead people who do laugh, but these the rat did not find.

The rat despaired, and so did his child rat and his grandson rat. And he started to hate God, and even cursed Him in secret. The rat, like humans, didn't dare curse God out in the open. And even though the promise was handed down through the generations, the first rat's grandchildren despaired too, and so did his great-grandchildren when their turn came, and they told each other that God makes promises but never keeps them. They even started looking for a different God, but they couldn't find another one.

Then one day the little girl reached the rat's pit. She was a man-cub. She was alive and breathing and she would nibble on their potatoes, and she smelled like a human. She made liquids and things that only humans make, and even though she wasn't one of them she lived in the darkness just like they did.

Although the rat in that pit hadn't witnessed the promise given by God, it was part of his rat-memory, which wasn't short at all, and he started hoping. He hoped and he hoped, but the little girl didn't laugh.

Grandma stopped, and I thought she wanted to rest. I asked if she would rather we continued on a different day. I'll work something out with my teacher, I said. I'll ask for an extension. Because I knew you'd understand if I asked to hand it in a week later.

Grandma stood up. She walked over to the window and said it was getting dark already. She asked me to turn on all the lights.

Another day went by, said Grandma. She wanted to know about the expression we use, “the time of your life”.

It's just a figure of speech, Grandma. The time of your life just means something that you're eager to hang on to. The best. You try to catch time with both hands, to keep it from moving, like in a black hole.

She laughed. Maybe to her I sounded like one of those know-it-alls on TV. That's what the rat should have told God...

She stopped.

Aren't you taking it down?

I said I'd remember it all.

She went on.

...or the little girl.

And I wasn't sure whether she was referring to the one in the legend or to me.

She picked up again right away.

Slowly, the smell of underneath the earth stuck to the little girl, and she became blacker and blacker and darker and darker, but she still wasn't laughing. The rat tried everything he could to make her laugh. He hopped around in the pit, he crawled out of the tunnel, he climbed back in, he sniffed at her smooth skin covering, he ate out of her hand, and she almost laughed, till the rat was convinced that pretty soon he'd succeed in laughing along with her. That's how he figured he'd prove to God that promises should always be kept.

But then, just as the rat was about to make his rattish dream come true, another human climbed down underneath the ground. Not a man-cub like the little girl, but one that had also been created in the divine image. He began to bite her, human bites, not rat bites. And digging tunnels inside her, human ones, not rat ones. The rat compared them, and concluded that it was

definitely a human creature, but was disturbed that this human had invaded his space and was reducing his chances of making his dream come true. Because even though the little girl had once made sounds, they'd been stifled by silence, and laughter was entirely out of the question.

I started to tremble. I couldn't help it. This wasn't the legend I'd been after, if I had ever asked for one in the first place – but I had no way of stopping it.

By now, this little girl was the most silent creature on earth. The rat had to pounce on her and go so far as to hop on her head just to prove to himself that she was even alive. Sometimes he thought she might be dead, and he would try to wake her up, because that was his only chance of making the ancient dream come true.

The fact that my grandmother believes that rats dream sounded ridiculous to me, but I didn't laugh. And the thing that caused the rat to make the effort was the scent of the little girl. A smell, but not that of a dead person. And even though he jumped higher than ever and hopped further than ever, the little girl was as still as a potato now, except that her skin covering wasn't smooth any more. The rat had figured out that his last hope had gone to pot. God, that son of a bitch, had cheated him, and had broken the promise without so much as blinking – another trait he'd passed on to whomever when he made that pompous announcement about man being "created in My image". That's what my grandmother said.

The rat – an animal that's anything but dumb – had worked out what God's worst mistake was. Because a world where children need to be placed in hiding, a world like that isn't just a glitch, it's the total collapse of all systems. A world like that ought to be wiped out completely and started from scratch.

And I'm not sure that this part belongs in the original story. I guess it must have been something my grandmother added.

And then the little girl climbed out of the earth.

I stopped.

There's something missing.

How did she just come out all of a sudden?

Grandma said: There was this ... black angel. It just arrived, and put her back in the world above.

I stopped again.

An angel? You don't believe in stuff like that, do you?

Grandma explained that this was just one of the figures of speech in the legend. They're codes, just like the icons on your computer. You click on them with your mouse. And that's what's so nice about the legend, because in ordinary stories the symbols are always liable to be carrying too heavy a load. But it's lucky that the computer can make symbols clean again and restore their lost dignity.

I refused to drop it: So she was saved. A miracle had happened after all.

My grandmother denied it right away. She said she didn't want to dwell on the angel too much, because a sharp turn like that is crucial to stories. It was getting late. She wanted to wind up and to leave me with something, even if it wasn't down in my notebook.

The most important thing, she said, was that the little girl had come back into the world above. She was finally standing above the pit and watching the gaping hole beneath her in broad daylight – even though she would never really feel warm in the sunlight again. Here was more proof that all the systems had broken down, that's what Grandma said. I bet it was the computer course that made her say that.

The little girl pointed at the rat and emitted an enormous sound instead of all the sounds she hadn't made before. She pointed to the sky, or maybe it was to the earth – and screamed: There's the happiest creature on earth!

Nobody knows who she was shouting to or who actually heard her shout. Those details my grandmother left out of her story, because even if you're just telling a story, you need to have a memory.

And then the rat laughed. His laughter made the ground shake. It was his first and last laugh, and it made the pit shake too from end to end till it

shook so hard that the rat collapsed into the pit, and was buried without a trace.

Thy footsteps are not known, the Psalms tell us.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs, and the light in the stairwell was out. It was so dark I couldn't even make out the opening to the old bomb-shelter. I waited for her. I shouted out that I was down, that I was OK, but nobody answered. Suddenly I got really worried. I pressed the switch but the light didn't go on. I figured there was a power cut, and I got scared for her. I hated the idea of her alone in the dark. I started slamming the switch, banging on it so hard that I almost broke it, then suddenly the light went back on.

My legs ran up the stairs. I don't know how to explain it, I don't know why myself, but I shut my eyes. I went up in the dark and it was my own darkness. I could taste it, chew it even. That darkness got stuck between my teeth, in my throat, in my stomach, between my legs...

I wanted to throw up.

And even when I really wanted to open my eyes I couldn't, as if something stronger than me was keeping them shut. I didn't even have enough power left for my own soul.

I've never been so scared in my whole life. I don't know how to explain it. I kept running up the stairs. I wasn't even sure I hadn't run too far, right past her floor. The fear and the darkness made me feel somehow that there was a light beyond my own body. Maybe that's what kept me from falling.

Why did the rat laugh?

It seemed as if I was hearing that laughter rolling through the stairwell.

As far as the bomb-shelter underneath the house.

I have a question for you, Miri. Would you happen to know what *Stash* means?

Have you ever heard the word *Stash*? Because it doesn't mean a thing to me. Though it does kind of reverberate. As though I've heard it lots of times and I simply can't remember it.

I'll tell you the truth. I thought I was hearing *Stash* in the stairwell, but I wasn't really sure it was my grandmother's voice, because she was upstairs and I was downstairs, so how could I have heard it at such a distance? Maybe it was just my imagination. You know. Being afraid and everything.

Her door on the third floor was wide open, and the light was trickling out. Dim, pale, trembling, but still it was light.

She was standing in the doorway and I couldn't make out her face because I was blinded from opening my eyes all at once. Now they opened without difficulty, as if they'd never been shut tight.

I said Grandma, Grandma, and that name seemed real to me. As real as can be.

Grandma, give me your hand. I can't see you.

Then I hugged her, and I felt her hugging me back, and her face was so close.

And I could feel her beads too, close to my heart.

But then I had the strangest thought. Stefan the Rat. Now I called him by his name. You see, Miri, I'd found ... a kind of consola ... I was so happy that there was something human in the pit with her.

Part Three

The Poems

From: nave@infomail.co.il

Sent: Thursday, December 31st, 2009, 5:48a.m.

To: stash@inter.net.pl

Subject: RE: death&life

Listen, Cookie, last night I hit on this site – really weird, horrible, disgusting – you've got to check it out. The poems are totally crazy, I mean they have nothing to do with anything, at least not anything we know. I have no idea who wrote them or why, and maybe it doesn't even matter.

The poems – or maybe they're words that have come undone – just showed up while I was surfing some house-pet sites. I always wind up discovering the most important sites by accident. I tried to resist at first, even tried some evasion tactics, but it was stronger than me, and against my better judgment I found myself inside. Then, curiosity got the better of me and I tried to figure out who was behind the little girl and the rat, but I couldn't. And it isn't that tracking people down is a mission impossible, but I don't have the right qualifications. Maybe you can crack it. I mean, you're the real hacker around here.

The poems are in Hebrew, but in Latin fonts, from left to right, and you'll see that the order keeps changing. Only the last one is always last. I translated them for you, though I'm sure you'd be able to understand them even without my help.

The writer – I can't tell if it's a man or a woman – decomposes the world into the most basic concepts, but presents them the other way around. You'll sense it – the innards pouring out.

And there's no going back.

The little girl and the rat are deep inside me now, and I can tell I'll never be able to put them behind me. Couldn't even eat or drink since I fell into it. All day long I sat there at my PC and sent it out to my whole address book. And once you go into the site, I'd like you to pass the poems on, to your own mailing list.

I think it's important for as many people as possible to get to be the other way around.

It's really easy to get into the site. Simply write www.girl&rat.com, and you're in.

On second thoughts, I have an idea about how to get this material to as many people as possible as quickly as possible. Remember the chain letters, where all sorts of people you don't know send them to you and you just delete them? My grandmother told me that when she was little, in the last century, they used to send them by snail mail. If you wanted to make sure the message got passed on, you'd add a header and a footer saying: "Unless you pass this on, you will suffer a terrible fate."

You've got to admit, intimidation is a very effective way of making sure that things don't get lost.

The more I read, the less I understand, but it doesn't matter, because I've already linked up with whoever lives in this upside down world, and you don't have to understand everything. It's enough to feel things. Like the two of us do, even though we've never met.

You won't believe this, but I even printed the poems out. Hard copy. Which I never do. Because I had this urge to feel the words themselves, to know that whatever appears in writing really does exist. I turned off the PC. I even unplugged it and lay there in the dark. Suddenly it seemed as if the words were actually appearing on my body – like a luminescent tattoo.

The nausea didn't stop until daybreak.

In the morning, my parents found it all, and freaked out. My mother screamed that the material was warped and that the poems were sick. And as far as my father was concerned, whoever had created the site was a basket case, and should be kept as far away from human society as possible,

because whoever it was had been an accomplice to a sordid plot. My parents even threatened to go to the Internet Squad and have them block access – which is why I’m writing to you right away, to make sure we circulate these poems to as many people as possible before they close in on us.

When they scream at me, I simply turn my back.

I sit there looking at the pages – real paper – and read it from the end to the beginning and back again, even though it’s obvious that the end isn’t really the end. I lie there, and someone is digging. At a depth I’ve never seen before. And I didn’t really mean to ... I mean, it isn’t mine, and suddenly it is. Without meaning to, I saw my own world decompose into the most basic concepts, and I’m a little girl and a rat too. I can remember it all by heart already, just in case it gets erased, though it doesn’t make sense for anything that’s been transmitted from person to person to ever be erased.

I couldn’t resist adding a line of my own because I have a strange feeling that that’s just what the poet, or the owner, or whoever it was would have wanted. Because only by reacting will we remember.¹

I think people can hear me all over the world. All day long I’ve felt like crying, but I’ve got to tell you, Stash, that I’ve never laughed like this in my whole life. Suddenly, I could hear a strange sound coming out of me, as if a weird creature was laughing somewhere in the dark.

Ending

I so much want to be dead

How can I get to be dead

It isn’t enough to want to be dead

And it isn’t enough to be dead

Because even when I am dead
It won't be over

Arithmetic

One two. That's that.
One child. One rat.

More Arithmetic

Guess what it found:
One child in the ground

Addition – Subtraction

Mother, Father, Servant – three
A little girl – a family

Servant's gone
And Father, Mother
Gone one after another

Little girl, no one's around
Lives alone beneath the ground

Big – Little

I have a big pit outside me

I have a little pit within

The big pit is mine

The little pit is the Stefan's

Why

Why potatoes?

Because.

Why lice?

Because.

Why darkness?

Because.

And why the Stefan?

How Many

How many potatoes?

This many.

How many lice?

This many.

How much darkness?

This much.

And how much the Stefan?

Male – Female

Lucky you're a he-rat

And not a she-rat

Lucky you're a he-animal

And not a she-animal

Because only a he-rat

Can get out and move on

And every she-rat

Is prey for the Stefan

Up There – Down There

Up there

Farmers

Further up

Birds

Furthest up

Parents

Down here

Jews

Further down

Children

Furthest down

Children

Of Jews

Mother – Father

Mother said be a good girl

And Father said nothing

Father Rat kept quiet

And Mother Rat said nothing

Too bad I wasn't born to them

Far – Near

Jesus is distant

The Stefan is close

And Mother

I have to forget the most

The Other Way Around

What is better
A pit with a living child
Or a grave with a dead child?

Or maybe the other way around –
A pit with a dead child
Or a grave with a living child?

Easy
It's easy
To get rid of a child who is small.
With a rat
It's not so easy at all.

Body Parts

Mother
Has no eyes
Has no arms
Has no legs
Has no lips
Mother
Just has a back

The Stefan Has
no eyes Has no
arms Has no
legs Has no lips
The Stefan just has a tail

A Hug

The lice are free
To roam the place
From my hair
To my forehead
And all over my face

I lie there
And I feel them tug
On my face
On my body
For me that's a hug

Mouth

I give you the name
First just Rat

Then My Pet

Then I give you one with panache

Like Stanislaw or Stash

Tell me yours, Little Girl

You implore.

The Stefan's mouth

Calls me the Whore

Skin

A hole-child

Is running out of skin

Tail

I have a friend with a tail

And he has four legs

The Stefan also has a tail

It's between his two legs

Head

When The Stefan climbs down

This is what I do:
I bang my head and hope
There's a child on the other side
With a rat-pet too

Porridge
Mother pig
Cooked some porridge
And this little piggy had none

Food
Dear Rat,
Make sure you eat it all
To keep from being small
Might makes right
And a giant bite

You'll swallow every crumb
For me you'll have your fill
Eat straight out of my hand
And show me you can kill

Hide And Seek

Hide and seek

Just count to ten

No one will find me

Ever again

Catch

If I run away

He gets even more wild

That's the game that we play

The Stefan, the child

Pretending

Let's pretend

I'll be the rat

And the little girl's you

Cause I want to be

The scary one too

Isn't It Lucky

Isn't it lucky the rat can bite for me

Isn't it lucky he can scratch for me

He can pass on diseases
He can crawl around too
And do all the things that I can't do

Colors

Green is what comes out of your mouth
Red is what comes out of your legs
Brown is what comes out from behind
Black is light

Cold – Warm

I'll never be cold
For dirt is my blanket
I'll always be warm
For I'm covered with blood

Dolly

I once had a dolly with braids
Who knew how to close her eyes
They cut off her braids
They gouged out her eyes
And now she's a dolly that's bald and blind

Looking for a girl of a different kind

Lullaby

Once upon a time

There was a little Jewish girl

And she had

Little Jewish hands

And little Jewish eyes

And a little Jewish mouth

And a little Jewish body

And a big hole

A Riddle

Where's the little girl?

What little girl?

Was there ever a little girl?

Saint

When Stefan the Saint

Was as small as an elf

He was snatched from his bed

By Mister Satan himself

A horrible monster
Was what his parents found
Their sweet and cuddly baby
Disappeared in the ground

I want the first Stefan
To come and hunt down
Mister Satan who owns
The bed-pit in the ground

Cause if rats were creatures
That Saint Stefan adored
He'd have Heaven summon
A hundred saints or more

Silence
When the Stefan thrashes
Bashes
Slashes
The animal sounds
Come out of the ground

And I
Vomit in silence

A Ladder

Up
And down
And up
And down
See-saw
See-saw

Time

The Stefan comes down
The Stefan goes up
Yesterday is what came before
Tomorrow is what comes next
Down comes the Stefan
Up goes the Stefan
That's how time marches on

Sun

Maybe the sun doesn't go up

And the night doesn't go down
Maybe beyond the pit
The world doesn't go round
And darkness isn't black
And the sun doesn't set
And I'm the only one left
But I don't know it yet

A Tree

At the tip of the root—
The one close to the sky—
There's a bird made of sand
Up and up it will fly
And tell them everything

Rain

If anything grows there
It's all thanks to me
Cause my body
Makes
Rain

Water

When you flow over me

Tell someone

That the little girl...

A Name

A little girl without a name

A place without a name

People without a name

Clean

Clean is when a rat licks me

Clean is when no lice hug me

Clean is when nothing comes out of me

And the cleanest I'll be

Is when I cease to be

A Promise

I'll pee

I'll shit

I'll die

I'll give off a stench

That's all I can promise

Afraid

I don't know any more

If I'm afraid

Because if I stop being afraid

I'll no longer be

Happy

The happiest day that lies ahead

Is the one when I find out

The Stefan's dead

Steps

Three steps

Forward

Three steps

To the left

Three steps

Back

Three steps

To the right

That's how you cross yourself

That's how you're blessed

Maybe if I do it

The pain will be less

1 Even if we don't quite know what it is that we're supposed to remember.[Back](#)

Part Four

The Dream

Girl & Rat Myth: A Chronology

2009-11	The legend and the poems appear on offbeat websites, spreading gradually
September 2011	The general public discovers the myth
2013	A Japanese animated series
2015	Mass hysteria generated by the hit, Tail
2020	PanEuroDisney decides to replace Mickey Mouse with
2024	The final circus performance before the Great Ecological
2025	The Great Ecological Disaster. Original sources of the myth are lost.
2029	The Art Corporation Festival – multimind beaming of Girl & Rat
2037	Warsaw Conference decision to exterminate Rats
2039	The last witness to the Holocaust still alive
2099	The virtual game of the girl-killer is spread all across the known universe
2099	Discovery of the ruins of Madonna of the Rat Church in a geographical place once called 'Poland'

Night of 31 December 2099

Stash

You're dreaming and you're not dreaming

I'm not dreaming, but maybe

Y-mee Prana

K-0005275-149

I'm infusing *Girl & Rat* into your dream right this minute. I had no choice but to break into your REMaker. Every legal and conventional way I tried to beam my discovery to you just didn't work. My official brainmails were cybercepted, and you didn't answer my private b-mails either. You were rebuffing me, with the skill of an info- screening pro. Not that I really stood a chance anyway. You made no bones about it: to you, my research is nothing but a "trivial hobby", "prying into the dustheaps of humanity". For someone who directs the Pan-Euro Anthropological Institute, you should have been able to see why the story of two cubs, a human one and a rat one, should interest you, or me, or anyone else at the Institute that keeps us together, shapes our life and gives it a purpose.

But now you have no choice but to dream of *Girl & Rat*.

And of me too.

I must break into your Dream Machine. I have no other choice.

It's my discovery...

I'm setting out on a voyage, Stash.

The archaic word *voyage* is very appropriate here, and it's no metaphor. I didn't choose it to wax poetic either. I mean it in the oldest sense – transporting the body from place to place. It's hard to imagine that this was the natural way to do it less than a hundred years ago. I know I'm breaking the rules of research protocol, but there isn't much time and this *voyage* is crucial. I've got to get going.

I've solved the enigma.

Are you following me, Stash?

Of course you are. I mean, at this very minute, my implachip is tapping every neuron and every fiber in my brain to beam *Girl & Rat* into your dream. The youngest myth yet. I've chosen the only way that's left to force the story onto you – infusing a dream. Like it or not, *Girl & Rat* is being recorded in your mind right this minute.

If it's really possible to force memory.

Two that became one. Fused. A two-bodied angel circling in an earthly maze. One body using her fingers to dig, the other using his claws, intertwined in an ever-tighter tangle. It's the choreography of one of the best-known dances of our generation.

In your dream, you are dancing. The implachip is beaming the steps, and the electronic umbilical cord that connects us is making us both move to the beat.

You're dancing and not dancing...

I'm not dancing...

Yet...

Maybe...

The web of the dream is holding you captive, and we circle together, a two-bodied angel emerging from the deep.

You know the rest as well as I do. *Girl & Rat* first appeared on the ancient internet some time towards the end of the first decade or the beginning of the second decade of the century. It was a short cycle of poems, and in one version it included a legend too. Different versions still exist, in various languages, but it's very hard to tell which ones are "authentic" – I mean they were written and uploaded before September 2011, when the poems emerged out of the shadows of the offbeat sites and electronic mails into the cultural mainstream. Suddenly people began to realize the magnitude of it, and the connection between the different versions became clear. A great deal was done to sift through them and to tease out the original one,

assuming there really was an authentic source to begin with, but it was no use. Even the attempt to determine the language of the original amounted to sheer speculation.

One popular theory, yet to be proven, says that the poems were written by a young woman, maybe a versatile artist just starting out. Why she chose to remain anonymous is not clear. Most people think she must have died, or perhaps lost her mind, shortly after putting the poems on the ancient internet. Otherwise, why wouldn't she have tried to capitalize on her success at a time when personal achievement and immediate gratification were all the rage? Anyone who's tried to figure out her identity has failed, because people – and that includes "surfers" as they used to be called – could easily cover their trail if they wanted to. Are the poems and legend strictly apocryphal, or are they based on some real event that the writer witnessed, or perhaps even experienced herself? Did she send out those poems as a sign of despair before taking her own life – or were they her last will and testament? These questions remain open.

As soon as the poems and the legend made their appearance in the digital domain in this century, they gave rise to a huge industry that has been taking on various shapes ever since. For more than nine decades, *Girl & Rat* has been told and recorded on every medium imaginable, and you even find its imprint in extraterrestrial human colonies. Each generation offered its own interpretation, whether based on ones from earlier times or introducing a meaning all its own.

It started with the poems, which became tremendously popular with teenagers. But once the Japanese comics appeared in 2013 and developed into a major industry, with interactive animation and multimedia games, *Girl & Rat* became a hit with younger kids too. When the pop music industry recognized the potential, many of the poems were set to music and made the charts. The mass hysteria peaked in the autumn of 2015 with *Tail*, which became an enormous hit and has had dozens of arrangements. One of them, a medium they used to call a "video clip", shows a singer down on his knees, with a winged rat bursting out of a cloud of black particles and handing him a cross made of potatoes. I find it hard to believe that you don't have a single one of these songs stored in a submemoryfolder,

because until about twenty years ago, the first few notes were the signal tune for several messaging systems. The screensaver version, the one that was such a hit when we were younger, shows a little girl who grows tails from every part of her body. She catches the beamee and turns him into her personal rat.

Remember that, Stash?

Your brain couldn't possibly have classified all of that under "irrelevant information".

Soon afterwards, *Girl & Rat* became the visual image most likely to be found on diaries, calendars and PDAs, even more popular than Raphael's angel – which was the most common visual at the turn of the century. *Girl & Rat* stickers are on display in a special wing of the Twenty-First Century Museum in Washington, and a notebook with the 2014 print sold last year for a record fifty million euollars.

I was there when they beamed the auction.

If only I knew who bought that precious notebook...

Since the second decade of this century, *Girl & Rat* has been an icon of alternative religious movements, mostly non-mainstream ones. The poems became cult texts: they've been carved on tombstones, quoted in eulogies and virtual condolence books, and sung at wakes and cremations. *Girl & Rat* shrines have been built all over, first just at sites dedicated to extinct species, and later at rest-and-recreation sites and online shopping centres. The most popular shrine ornament is an electronic figurine of a dark, eyeless little girl with seven rat tails wrapped around her arm. It was later converted into a popular slot machine: figure out the right tail to pull – and win the jackpot.

The legend that went with the poems played an important role in the development of the *Girl & Rat* myth. It probably began with a rumor – an incredibly effective way of transmitting information – and soon cropped up on the ancient internet. The legend provided the narrative context in which the poems could be interpreted. New details were added from time to time, such as the tradition that identified the little girl as the daughter of a father from India and a Native American mother.

No sooner did the phenomenon take hold than an opposition formed, especially in North America and Western Asia. Almost every religious leadership took part in the effort to boycott the new fashion and to campaign against it. Politicians, educators and parents' organizations joined the bandwagon. Some of them tried to prove that the poems and the legend were connected to the Cult of the Devil, and made them out to be a despicable incitement to killing, suicide, extreme violence and child abuse. The accusations gained widespread support initially, and I'm sure they had their effect on you, too.

But ultimately, *Girl & Rat* defied all its critics and assumed its place as a cultural tradition. By 2020 it was here to stay, thanks to the dramatic decision of the Board at PanEuroDisney Productions to replace Mickey Mouse with Mickey Rat and to give it wings: the black wing cast an artificial darkness, and the other one was a transparent screen through which the beamer could see his or her own reflection recast as a little girl.

I'm beaming a sequence of visuals into your dream right now, even though my implachip is already picking up your revulsion.

There's the she-rat nursing a little girl – trademark of Hydromel Corporation, which took over the sale of subterranean water until the reservoirs became so contaminated that they could no longer be used...

And a crown presented to Elizabeth III at her coronation. It is still on exhibit at the New Age Museum in Beijing, studded with diamonds in the shape of rat-tails the first to use nanotechnological production methods...

There's a black angel with its wings clipped. It's struggling to fly, but it doesn't actually take off until a little girl and a rat become its artificial wings. Together they soar, swooping down into the ground: a multidimensional commercial for subterranean residential projects...

And a rat with gills, symbol of *Hasgard*, the first submarine stronghold in the world...

And a pair of head-wings made of reconstructed rat cells, which was the height of fashion about a decade ago – so many young women wore it to their proms, don't you remember?

Icons, talismans and personal feeding tubes in the shape of winged mutants, with the body of a rat and the head of a little girl. In my virtual cache I have a cheek stud like that. I always wear it during our regular beamings. You haven't noticed.

Or maybe you have.

Ever since you became Director of the Pan-Euro Anthropological Institute, you've chosen to focus on the study of young extraterrestrial civilizations, and slashing our work on the old ones, including the study of how the new *Girl & Rat* myth came into being. Your new program, the one they dubbed *Anthropology of the Future*, had a clear goal, and all of the scientists at the Institute seem to be caught up with it: to break away from the darkness of times past and to focus on studying the New Man, perfectly networked and genetically repaired. The study of the past has run its course, so you declared, and whatever shreds of information have survived, whatever dwindling residues have yet to be adapted and networked, have sunk into the oblivion of a pre-digital world. Archaeology in every shape and form left nothing more to the imagination. All that remained was the present, and the only perspective for interpreting it lay not in the past but in the future. In your beamings, you tried to persuade me that the greatest danger awaiting mankind was the romantic longing for our lost origins, for roots. This infinite number of conflicting perspectives that have led us only into anarchy. We have to rid ourselves of this longing at all costs, you declare, because when we're in the grip of the past, we relive all of the scourges that we thought we'd avoided: violence, brutality, fear and rage – everything that became sanctified in the past as "memory".

Right from that first mind-conference, where you mentioned your *Anthropology of the Future* program, my implachip started blipping heretical thoughts. I thought it was precisely because of a lack of perspective based on the past that the human species was liable to be trapped in an endless cycle of horrors, with each successive generation sinking back into a terrifying void and learning nothing from experience. If only I'd had the guts to say so at the time...

Don't worry, Stash. Memory, which you treat with such contempt, excels at the art of nullification anyway...

You have to admit though that, despite my heretical thoughts, I never questioned your authority. I publicly announced I was dropping my own research project, but still, secretly, without admitting it even to myself at first, I kept collecting information, bit by bit. I couldn't get *Girl & Rat* out of my mind. It fermented within me, demanding something to latch on to. When you discovered that I was still obsessed with that "trivial hobby" of mine, you tried to persuade me that every fact that could possibly be checked or verified had already been stored, so that my research would be of no interest to the brain-beaming community. Later you tried to rationalize that even if the roots of the legend were out there waiting for me, they were hopelessly banal and couldn't offer any new insight worth the effort. I haven't forgotten your studies of the representation of evil in late-twentieth century computer games, the ones that you later disavowed as your scientific career progressed. Maybe that's why you dismissed *Girl & Rat* with such contempt, and why you judge it as nothing more than a primordial fear of light – a final effort of civilization to make way for darkness before it completely disappears.

What is fear, Stash? My genetic card reads "Repaired".

A *hole-child*

Is running out of skin

The dream...

I feel as if I'm nursing you – a rare ritual practised by only a few remote tribes on earth.

You're not ready to give yourself over yet, but my implachip senses how your flashes of resistance are growing weaker.

I'm not trying to undermine the authority of the Anthropological Institute, Stash. On the contrary: I have great respect for the pioneers who paved the way for me. Into your dream I'm beaming a study by Professor Reiner Marcellus Schwartz, who tried to prove that the creatures in *Girl & Rat* are not really from the twenty-first century at all. He pointed out the pagan and Christian motifs that appear throughout the legend, and mapped out its course from its days as a popular legend towards the end of the Roman Empire until its incorporation into the Digital Age. I want to tell you about

the theory of my supervisor, Professor Mammuna Shanti: she believes that the work was originally written in Gujerati, and that it contains echoes of the Great Earthquake of Gujarat in 2001. Among other things, Professor Shanti makes recourse to the literature which tried, none too successfully, to link *Girl & Rat* to the Temple of the Rats – the Karni Mata Temple in the town of Deshnok in Rajasthan. Even though it hasn't been used for worship for almost seven decades, the shrine is still intact. Over the years, it has housed thousands of rats, and they've received the daily offerings of believers and priests. Various myths surrounding the shrine establish a clear link between a feminine, maternal divinity and rats as the reincarnation of human-cubs.

Your implachip is not responding.

You're still fighting me.

All of the studies before mine led to a dead end. Even Professor Mammuna Shanti ultimately retracted her original theory, and in our final exchanges, she sided vehemently with your interpretation of the poem as the outpouring of a subversive entity that had been taking advantage of the electronic networks in their earlier days to gain maximum circulation within a short period.

All of the experts have dropped *Girl & Rat*, but I...

An amazing discovery...

Because if I stop being afraid

I'll no longer be...

Your REMaker is trying to throw me out. Don't fight it, Stash. It is competing against *Girl & Rat* and I'm spitting out broken lines. What a shame that the original collection has not been found. Jews are mentioned in only a single poem from an earlier version, a very fragmentary one.

Stuck inside the brain...

An undo command is needed...

Can't get rid of...

A little girl is treading on the outstretched tail of a rat in the volcanic mouth of Mount Egmont in New Zealand. It was a circus act performed only once in 2024, a few months before the Great Ecological Disaster, which is why it was never documented. I have no choice but visualize it for you.

According to my genetic card, that was when the process of my conception began. That's when my fetal cells started to link.

We are watching the circus act together now. Down below is the abyss. A total void. The little girl's eyes are shut, and she's moving forward slowly. The rat's tail is sweeping wildly from side to side like in a circus...

A volcanic eruption...

She's falling, or maybe flying.

My powers of visualization aren't strong enough to produce the ending for you.

I remember only too well the condescending b-mail where you insisted that nobody is capable any more of separating Little Red Riding Hood from the wolf that swallowed her, or of finding out if Oedipus was really a king or just a lunatic fantasizing about sleeping with his own mother.

You were right, of course. But precisely because *Girl & Rat* is less than a hundred years old, we can still discover its roots.

A young myth...

A thin slough, a shell...

Precisely because a myth is an encrypted historical memory, it's my duty to discover the truth hiding underneath it, with all the stir it's generated. *Girl & Rat* has been dug out, and is part of the public domain now, a free-for-all that anyone can jostle with. I'll break off the shell and find the nucleus of truth. I must. This is the girl that once was. This is darkness. No other exists.

I hear a scream...

Somewhere deep inside me...

Not from any recognizable part of myself...

The little-girl-who-once-was existed. The pit-that-once-was existed.
Darkness. Nothing more.

And the Stefan...

Why is he the only one in the myth who bears a name?

I think I know where ... it all happened.

The pit...

The little girl...

My discovery...

I must hurry.

Before it'll be forever buried.

I wasn't beamed to *Girl & Rat* when I was a child. I didn't have a mother who would put me to sleep with lullabies and bedtime stories about *Girl & Rat*. I had a perfect parental voice, made by state-of-the-art processors. And *Girl & Rat* weren't part of an anthropological development plan. I have no offspring, so I didn't have a chance to transmit the lullabies and the bedtime stories to the next generation either. But ever since I discovered them as a youngster, *Girl & Rat* have fascinated me as much as they've terrified me. The poems keep spinning through my head, over and over, almost on their own. I have no idea why they move through me so freely, or why I feel as if they possess me. They seem to be taking over every cell and every neuron...

I have a friend with a tail and he has four legs.

The Stefan also has a tail...

I'm trying to retrieve...

When did I hear it for the first...

Shuddering...

What's this?

A glitch...

I'm trying to fix it.

Y-mee, that's my name.

Why me?

At last, you're responding. There was bound to be a clash between my brain and yours. Not everything operates the way it should in our perfect world.

That's just as well...

The implachip is blipping retrievals from our previous b-mails. You often used to suggest that I undergo an external memory scan, to see if my fascination with *Girl & Rat* doesn't have something to do with a hidden recess in my memory, or something that went wrong in an earlier, uncontrolled stage of my development. You hinted that simple surgery might help solve the problem and fix me for good.

I've got to admit that I couldn't help feeling that way myself. Maybe there was something wrong with my brain in the first place, which is why I contacted the diagnoscope, to rule out any medical condition. I've been given a clean bill of health, Stash. My implachip is fine too. Otherwise, how could I have broken into your REMaker?

Once, years ago, in some private part of your past that you've managed to delete, I guess, you left me a personal message in my brain box. You asked me to recommend a dream. You said you'd exhausted everything in your own dreamtory.

I had nothing to lend you, Stash. The dream I call up every night, the one that's been tailor-made for me, has always left me...

Something's missing.

Y-mee

Why me

A little girl and the Stefan...

The other figure...

In black...

Missing...

Who is this black figure who looks like an angel?

Angels?

They do not exist, only in dreams.

Come with me to the last day of the year 2029. We're in the agricultural reserve in Pan-America. The Art Corporations Festival. Thousands of artists from all over the world are scribbling away and ad-libbing scenes from the *Girl & Rat* poems on the giant plain. Among their props are potatoes brought in specially from the emergency supplies deep in the Antarctic. This was also the first experiment in multimind beaming, which meant that every beamer in the world, even the ones at Hybrid Space Station, were active participants.

I haven't taken part in the live event yet, of course, and this was my first-ever retrieved cruise. Where were you then, Stash? I never did discover who paired us up...

A contemporary version...

The most up-to-date...

Billions in this world and beyond are being beamed into the game at this very moment.

The satanic little girl is going down into the pit. In the darkness, she hunts down the rat and makes it her slave. All the players use the rat to abuse the Stefan and win points every time the tormented victim cries out for help. The rat takes pity on the Stefan, and all the players are supposed to use the little girl to kill both of them.

End of game.

The players are drenched in fresh blood.

This role reversal horrifies me. The thought of the Stefan becoming an innocent victim and the little girl becoming a bloodthirsty murderer is unbearable. I need to recreate the right order and cleanse the girl's name.

You might be able to justify my voyage by pointing out that it will put an end to *Girl & Rat* once and for all. Or I may decide that forgetfulness is the preferred human condition, and then the two cubs will quietly disappear behind the curtains, and so will I.

Without a trace.

This voyage...

I must return to the pit...

Need to go deep down.

Two weeks ago, I went over my findings again, the way I do every night. I activated the location search engine. The implachip probes put me in Eastern Europe, and the database crossed me with the ruins of a forgotten church that was uncovered only recently, when laser micro-excavators were extending a subterranean residential habitat. After the protests of the Christian Preservation Society, the developers agreed not to touch the vestiges of the church, and to allow the construction of a tourist simulator site. In one of the side niches, behind the altar, was a scene from the Last Judgment Day, drawn with something solid, possibly a piece of charcoal. In the center was the Madonna cradling a gaping-mouthed rat. Next to her, the earth had opened wide and a long procession of people was emerging, led by a little girl, her face a blur.

Such strange iconography...

My implachip was deactivated for a long time.

Into your dream I beam the Madonna of the Rat Church, located where there used to be a small village before it was completely wiped out in the Great Ecological Disaster. The foundations remain, along with some fragments of tombstones in the nearby cemetery. Relics from the turn of the century indicate that the site was a Catholic farming village. Its inhabitants lived off their crops of potatoes and grain, which of course provide a natural habitat for rats.

That animal, which neither of us ever saw because it does not exist any more, is jabbing its teeth and claws into you right now.

Biting into your dream.

The rat comes from semi-arid open fields in Asia. It later wandered to Europe with the spread of farming, and became man's most faithful companion. Wherever man went, the rat followed too – invariably sharing man's bread and water, linked to man with chains more powerful than any digital web.

Or maybe not.

In your dream, you now stroke the grayish back of the rat, and its lumpy underbelly. Its torso is covered with a thin fur, and only its tail is hairless. You touch its claws, four on each front foot, five on each back one. Its digestive system was originally meant for seeds, but for some unknown reason, it began biting into human flesh, too. The female rat had up to a thousand young each year, using her sense of smell to tell them apart.

I haven't been able to beam the mother to you. Or her offspring either, all of them born blind and naked.

The rat in your dream is completely real, gnawing and thrashing between your legs, but the real rats have disappeared from the face of the earth.

Following the Great Ecological Disaster, this species was suspected of being a carrier of lethal viruses. Stowaway rats were discovered on spaceships. They gnawed through cables, cut off information supplies and created digital chaos. As you remember, the Warsaw Conference adopted a unanimous decision to exterminate rats, and the de-infestation was completed in 2037, just before my own fetal cells were conceived. The archive at the Anthropological Institute still has an ancient silicon trap connected to a transmitter that activated a poison syringe as soon as a rat was detected.

This is not the dream you were expecting, I know. The effort it takes for the brain to forget is far greater than the effort it requires to remember.

Sometimes I think I am...

Who am I?

Y mee?

In the great wave of nostalgia that swept over us in the fifties, exactly when people were again caught up in *Girl & Rat*, the rodent lost some of its demonic overtones. Its persistent search for food and shelter is perceived as a heroic fight for survival, worthy of compassion and empathy. Over the past few years, there have been many attempts, in all the leading genetic laboratories, to clone foolproof rats, but no scientist has succeeded in creating one that will function as a proper pet in a beamed environment.

Madonna of the Rat...

The implachip is so rattled that it discharged. I wasn't sure at first, but soon the idea caught up with me. I was facing the earliest evidence of the myth: sixty-five years before it first appeared on the ancient internet.

You dream – I give birth to your dream.

The punishment imposed on trespassers of consciousness...

I'm ready to pay the price.

Unless there's a malfunction, you'll feel almost nothing when you wake up. Just a few slivers. Even an internal memory scan will show nothing but an obscure, incomprehensible nightmare, and you'll cancel it out, the way you defuse the stress of heavy responsibility in a job like yours. But when you finally realize that the slivers of the dream add up to something real, when you're told that I no longer belong to any corporation, and when you see sufficient proof that I've set out on a voyage into No-Net-Land, the *Bohu* – an unknown world beyond the net – *Girl & Rat* will begin to cruise through your bloodstream, to be absorbed spontaneously into every cell and every neuron of your being.

Stash in the conch of sleep.

The girl in the dark...

If only I knew what really happened in the pit.

I need to make you understand why my body needs to be included in the imminent voyage. If you do, maybe you'll try to make your peace with the dream I imposed on you, instead of eradicating it.

The visit to the Madonna of the Rat Church site shook me so hard, not only because of the incredible discovery, but because it was my very first experience with the limits of remote perception. An invisible barrier between me and my sensations. I just couldn't cross it. I fingered objects, yet I couldn't touch them. I focused my gaze, and the sight decomposed into an illusion. I stomped my feet, but there didn't seem to be a connection between my stomping and the sound waves from the floor. I sank my teeth into the potatoes, but there was no sensation of taste.

Even the smells...

My nostrils dilated...

I was so desperate to...

A kind of revelation grabbed me in that church.

What is a revelation?

Shutting down, turning out the lights – that's a familiar activity...

The most routine one of all.

My REMaker is unsettled. Who is dreaming whom? I really don't know, any more.

Your attempts to shut down my tyrannical consciousness won't work.

I didn't give in right away to the urge to cut myself free of the net and to move into No-Net-Land.

At first, I tried to use more conventional research methods like the one you distrust so much – the New Séance technology. The discovery of a possible physical source to the myth thrilled me. A breakthrough. I truly believed that now I'll be able to communicate with the dead at the Madonna of the Rat Church, and solve the enigma. I had been hoping to reach some remainders of consciousness in whoever had been living in that forgotten site. But all my efforts failed.

Once, though, something did flicker. I found myself inside a sealed space, not much different from my usual environment. For a moment everything grew completely dim, and I dove through the darkness, but I couldn't decide whether it was just a glitch or whether it really meant something. My

implachip picked up some strange signals and I had a feeling that they were words in an unfamiliar language, but the automatic interpreter could not even recognize what it was.

I've reached an impasse, Stash. The only way out is to go on a physical voyage. I know it's an impulse that doesn't seem to make any sense, and that choosing an ordeal that nobody has taken for years may cost me my life.

Exile in The *Bohu* of No-Net-Land...

I'm ready to pay the price.

I am hocking this dream in the pawnshop in your head, in the hope that some night you will redeem the flicker of that ancient memory...

Why me?

K-0005275-149...

Forever in a pit...

Stash, never again will you be able to pretend that you "do not know".

You are my future, Stash. Maybe this argument will convince you to let me go. Something is waiting at the end of the voyage.

If not for me, then maybe for you.

Ten days ago, following another unsuccessful séance, I paid my last b-visit to the Church. On the neck of the painted Madonna I recognized something. For a moment I thought it was nothing more than a digital hoax. Why hadn't I noticed it before?

A tiny object stuck to the wall. I could feel it with all of my senses, but I wasn't able to touch it.

The implachip analyzed the materials. Extra-fine pegs. Twigs of birch. Dating: a hundred and fifty-five years old.

You're fingering the object now. I visualize how soft your fingers are. Do you recognize the object, Stash?

It's a Star of David, symbol of the Jews.

Theologians claim this is a people that has succeeded in refining memory into the ultimate means of spiritual survival, by systematically handing down hundreds of commandments and prohibitions through the chain of the generations.

You can't imagine how relieved I was to discover a new and legal direction for continuing my research.

Using ultra-refined sensors to move in all directions...

My mind crosses borders...

Believe me, Stash, I too wanted this voyage not to be necessary.

I beamed myself to The Israel – a tiny political entity along the Mediterranean Sea that still insists on retaining its sovereignty. I couldn't find any traces of the source of *Girl & Rat* there. The local guards greeted me warmly and allowed me free access to all the mindline libraries, except one that they insisted on classifying as secret.

It was surprisingly easy for me to break into it. I have no idea what the secret is.

My findings in TheIsrael puzzled me. We have at least one version of *Girl & Rat* in Hebrew that's considered authentic, and it's dated to early 2011. But even though TheIsrael is the only society that still speaks some Hebrew – that ancient Semitic language written in Latin characters – this version is not mentioned in any of the local libraries that I had access to. The local anthropologists couldn't track it down either. Whatever versions of *Girl & Rat* that I found were all later adaptations or translations from English or from Arabic, mostly from the past twenty years.

Following a quick mythological mapping of all the b-data, I realized that the repudiation of the ancient Hebrew version was no coincidence. It reflected a basic position that rules out any link to tradition.

I know you're categorically opposed to any study of societies that still insist on retaining their sovereignty, Stash, but if you ever do decide to be beamed to TheIsrael you can look forward to a fascinating anthropological adventure that could shed new light on your *Anthropology of the Future* project. I'm convinced you'd like the people there, Stash. It's a society addicted to the present, alienated from anything that preceded its establishment as a sovereign state and determined to focus exclusively on whatever will serve to justify its future existence. You'll have to admit that this society's selective memory has led to an amazingly vibrant culture. They change values and icons at a dizzying pace and they always prefer the new to the old, or the not-quite-yet-old. You'll be glad to know that TheIsrael became caught up in the digital revolution with near-theological fervor, maybe because of how it filled the void left when they obliterated their past, including their Zionist ideology and Jewish religion. But it seems like the obliteration of the past has led to a pathological distortion in the way they perceive the future: almost every mythological representation of the future is short-term, and includes a cataclysm. This misperception of time is one that people in TheIsrael refuse to acknowledge, and every one of the local anthropologists became impatient, almost hostile, when I mentioned my theories.

After that wild goose chase in TheIsrael I instructed the implachip to beam me to Ju-Ideah. It's a separatist self-contained entity, a network of autonomous religious enclaves spread over the geographical area surrounding the sovereignties of TheIsrael and ThePalestine, among others.

At first, I was optimistic. In complete contrast to TheIsrael, Ju-Ideah does not obliterate the past. In fact, it regards the past as sacrosanct. Their motivation for separatism isn't that they want to forget, but rather that they're intent on avoiding anything that's new or different. It's really surprising to discover such a striking contrast between two entities with the same historical parents. Even the way they dress in Ju-Ideah is old-fashioned, and my quick investigation revealed that it originated in seventeenth-century Poland – the same geographical space where the Madonna of the Rat Church is located.

The digital guards instructed me to extinguish every trace of physical presence and to cover everything but my eyes. They directed me to two of the community elders who agreed to tell me some nostalgic legends and gave me free access to some of the libraries where these legends are kept. To my delight, I discovered that many of the stories took place in Europe in recent centuries, but I found no trace of any *Girl & Rat* motif.

Still, I honestly believed that Ju-Ideah of all places was bound to offer some mythological representation of that little Jewish girl from the past, but it soon turned out that all of the mythical heroes are male spiritual shepherds known as rabbis, and that most of the mythological material I found centered on their graves. They're the ones who are assumed to bestow immediate remedy to every distress. One of the elders was convinced that the true reason for my query was my desire to use one of these graves to be blessed with a mate and with offspring, and he insisted on referring me to the grave of a famous rabbi, Nachman, from the village of Uman in a place once called the Ukraine. When he discovered that I am not family-programmed, he referred me to a grave in North Africa, and promised that if I visited there I would be blessed with longevity.

Just to give you an idea of the type of ritual practiced in Ju-Ideah, I'm sending you an object for your simulatorium. Think of it as my farewell gift. It's a lucky charm they've been nailing to the doorposts of their homes for thousands of years. It contains a tiny piece of parchment with an ancient secret inscription that they would not show me because I admitted that I didn't believe in any particular religion. Some say that the technique used for inscribing the parchment, an ancient craft known as handwriting, is also used to spell out a mysterious ancient name.

For a moment I thought...

The little girl...

She doesn't have a name in any other version either.

When I recounted the *Girl & Rat* legend, the idea of some link between a Polish-born Jewish girl and the Christian faith was categorically rejected, and the JuIdeah elders' initial politeness suddenly disappeared. The beaming was interrupted, and my access to the public sources of

information was blocked. My apologies were rejected. When I tried to break into the blocked data stores, I discovered that, despite its longstanding separatism, or perhaps precisely because of it, their data security technology is state-of-the-art. It may even be more advanced than ours. I would never have succeeded in breaking into their REMaker – if they even use REMakers there...

The exile of memory...

What submemoryfolder did they banish the little girl to?

Trapped somewhere...

The implachip is working at full capacity now.

Unbearable...

Have to break loose...

No. You don't have to. I hear your voice clearly, Stash. Let go. Y-mee Prana. Your thought is crashing against my implachip. You're hurting me.

Resign yourself to it, K-0005275-149: human memory doesn't have the capacity to contain ... And yet...

Like the tailbone...

Who has a tail?...

Stash, you've been through every genetic repair, and you're disappointed that the bone is still lodged in the lower part of the spine. According to your plan, man was destined to be rid of this reminder. A reminder of what?

Once upon a time we were...

The Stefan.

Perhaps the body remembers what the soul refuses.

As a final resort, I beamed a “Who Remembers?” message all over the mindnet. The answers pointed to children who had been stashed away in closed places, and identified so many perpetrators by name that I thought I may really have found a lead. But the fact that there was no rat mentioned ruled out a connection.

My brain box picked up a message from someone who identified himself as Stash. For a moment I thought...

Then I heard a kind of thundering voice, rolling...

Was this laughter?

I must confess, Stash, last night I decided, for the first time in my life, to disconnect from my REMaker. I know that a spontaneous dream is the kind of childish prank you'd expect of rebellious adolescents, and few of those who have been through the experience would consider repeating it. Instead of selecting a cool item from my dreamertory, I turned off my implachip and let my brain take over.

In the dark...

Tell someone

That the little girl...

I ... never had...

A mother...

Or a...

Suddenly my eyes opened wide. This was not the soft and fuzzy awakening that we all experience. I couldn't control my tremors without tranquilizers. Only then did I understand why I'd felt such a strong urge to break away from the REMaker. As soon as I set out on my voyage, after all, I'll have nothing but spontaneous dreams. I was paralyzed with fear. I cannot bear the thought that every time I will shut my eyes I'll be forsaking myself to the unbridled tyranny of my brain. It will wreak havoc with the strata of consciousness, like a child in need of genetic repair. My implachip signaled concern about my sanity, and instructed me to cancel my plans for the voyage immediately.

You and I should be forever grateful for living after the invention of the REMaker.

For hours I lay awake, overwhelmed by this strange, unfamiliar feeling. Despair, Stash. If ever you've been trapped in despair, you never shared it with me.

And then it struck me...

The nightmare that I woke into was much worse than the spontaneous dream that I'd forced on myself.

For the rest of my life...

In the bubble of the net...

Always trapped.

A programmed dream.

I want to wake up...

There...

In No-Net-Land...

In the *Bohu*...

All I remember of that dream is splinters of a story. No clear sequence of events or circumstances.

Just a sensation...

Fists beating and a strange sound...

Laughter...

Me banging against a solid mass...

A wall...

Closing in...

I think I was dreaming in black-and-white... More black than white...

Suddenly I was completely awake. My body struck me in all its tangibility.

Liquids poured out of me...

Forgive me, Stash. I didn't mean to upset you.

I'll spare you the rest.

If the little girl had been living in our time, with our readily accessible technology for healing after horror, we would have taken her to one of the

clinics for Memory Excision – a safe and simple operation – on an outpatient basis. Once it is over, the patient resumes normal life, and the memory gap – this black hole they used to refer to as *trauma* – is completely eradicated.

I pull you back to the first experimental uses of memory excision, performed on adults who had witnessed a murder. Even back then, the results were impressive. The patients lost all traces of the violent episode and regained a normal continual memory.

First, the surgeons would perform a memory bypass procedure, and then they would excise the irrelevant information. Once the traumatic experience had been severed from its carrier, it was deflected to a dedicated submemoryfolder which could only be accessed by special court order.

Surprisingly, the operation is never successful in the case of children, and the younger the person, the lower their chances of full recovery.

The little girl, whoever she may have been...

How did she survive?

If indeed she survived...

Death seems preferable to a life with such a memory.

That rat...

That little girl who once was...

The Stefan...

The dream is beginning to decompose. I must hurry. My time is near.

A creature leans over me, forming a sign on my forehead. His lips are moving, but he makes no sound. Who is he? Maybe the REMaker has malfunctioned, and it is converting only sights, not sounds.

As if the creature is telling us both something.

What will you do with my dream, Stash?

I've turned you into one of the *Remembeare*s, one of those who have the traumatic event registered in their consciousness without actually having experienced it themselves: the second circle of witnesses to the violent experience. The commonest problem among patients being treated with memory excision is linked to the fact that the event itself can't be excised from the memory of the other carriers.

I'm your *Remembeare*, Stash.

I'll give off a stench.

That's what

I can

Promise...

Only recently, the legal world was all worked up. Some victims had pressed charges, and were demanding full restoration of their missing memory link. The petitioners argued that the excision violated their right to determine their own fate, and that without the missing event, no matter how unsettling or horrible, they were not what they were supposed to be. The parties have reached a settlement though: the petitioners have withdrawn their claim, and a procedure has been launched for developing and testing a technology of controlled memory imprinting. It will allow memory stores to be mended without having to excise any "irrelevant information".

Stash, have you heard about the guy who wanted to have a false experience imprinted in his brain? He said that he was under no obligation to actually experience it. When he entered an offer on the net to acquire traumatic experiences, his implachip was jammed with bids.

Look for him, Stash. He's the ideal subject for your *Anthropology of the Future* project.

Why me?

Y-mee.

K-0005275-149.

I'm being retrieved 150 years back. The eastern side of Pan-Euro. A flashing Star of David...

Stash, we're in a haze of thick info-clouds, enveloped by a dense and shapeless fog that the human mind cannot contain. Our only means of protecting ourselves from the torrents of information is to minimize it and package it so that it allows access on demand only. That's what the separate, dedicated submemoryfolders are for. The research convention establishes that our individual implachips will be beamed exclusively to our own programmed submemoryfolders, to ensure that we derive as much as possible from whatever information is needed. But even so, we don't stand a chance of accessing all of the information programmed into our 130-year lifespan.

Stash, let me plant a question in your dream. What do you think of the statement that all of human memory is visible to us? Isn't it a kind of self-deception, aimed at making us think that since the information is out there somewhere we don't have to look for it any more?

A braid of tails...

When I hop to the right, you hop to the left.

You're in front and I'm in back.

The tails are intertwined between my legs.

I'm falling.

You hold out your...

I can't grab it.

I know I've disobeyed the rules, but I couldn't help using insights I gained in my attempts to break through the defenses of Ju-Ideah. Of course, legal permission to be beamed to other dedicated submemoryfolders is beyond brainability. Only people whose brains have been preselected or who have been programmed to withstand conditions of information overflow have that opportunity, and their brain operates under continual supervision, to avoid collapsing. I'm not one of the pre-selected ones. My brain is defined as normal.

What's this strange part inside me? Something that is not a chemical conductor, or an electrical one, or an electro-biological one...

Carrying some secret information, with no name and no shape...

Sorry, Stash. A glitch in the control mechanism. My mind is throwing up...

Y-mee Prana. Is that really my name?

What's happening...

Chaos. *Tohu*...

Like the day before the Creation.

Furthest down

Children

Of Jews...

I beam you to The Holocaust, a huge submemoryfolder. Yet only a handful of people are allowed to enter, and even fewer take an interest in it.

The Stefan...

Who is the Stefan...

Are there many more Stefans?

I'll spare you the polemic about the Holocaust. It started during the lifetime of those who actually experienced it. A large part of the submemoryfolder is devoted to question marks, casting doubt on the many testimonies within. Most of the films are presented as reenactments, and many of the documents as forgeries or misrepresentations. With the gradual disappearance of the survivors and the dwindling of the *Remembearers*, the controversy surrounding the authenticity of these testimonies has died down.

Stash, the last documented interview with a Holocaust survivor took place in The Israel in 2039. The man was over one hundred years old and he is referred to as "the last witness". You would naturally expect a human wreck, someone ignited by hatred and revenge. But you will be surprised, Stash.

It's an unusual recording. For some reason, nobody has bothered to make it beam-enabled, so that I've had to use an external apparatus to decipher the sights and sounds step by step. The smells could not be reconstructed though.

I am retrieving the deciphered version for you.

The old camera is shaky, and the imaging is uneven. The hands holding the primitive instrument are the hands of the last witness's granddaughter recording her elderly grandfather. At some point, the camera swerves towards his three great-grandchildren and nine great-great-grandchildren. They're sitting motionless at his feet, listening to his testimony face to face. Towards the end, he says: "You will never understand", and performs an obstruction. If they'd been using modern technology, he wouldn't be able to do that.

It's just as well...

The eyes of the last witness... like black holes...

Lucky I was watching this man through the digital shield.

Stash, at last, I found the courage to plant my heretical thoughts into your dream, those I didn't dare mention during our first mind-conference; if we were to excise all the horrific events from human consciousness, what would our memory consist of?

Yes, we would be trapped in a never-ending loop of murder, hatred and fear, with each generation starting the terrible cycle anew, having learned no lesson whatsoever.

True, a historical scar does not guarantee that the horrific events will never happen again, but the very existence of memory – the detritus at the bottom of our pit – might still leave us some room for hope.

I'm so tired, Stash. I would never have imagined that dreaming for another consciousness demands such an effort. Your eyelids are moving. You're struggling to wake up. And me, I'm using every ounce of strength in me to stop you from awakening. The dream-time is running out.

A canopy of angels is circling over you, hovering above with their colorful wings. This is the most popular dream. Billions choose it every night. Years ago, I instructed the REMaker to tailor the dream to me, and it replaced the angels with a black-cloaked creature wallowing in dirt. I was never able to see its face.

When I woke, I instructed the REMaker to restore the colors, but the machine disobeyed me.

Night after night...

Always black.

Now there's no need to send the REMaker in to be fixed.

Extra-hypnagogical thoughts pour out of me.

My insignificant research.

Ferreting through discards of history.

I've turned into the sum-total of this myth. Always a little girl, always a rat. Just not the Stefan.

Please, just not him. Explain to me, Stash, with all our technological advancement, why is it that the only gene we have not succeeded in correcting – the only one that has remained intact – is the gene of brutality?

Even if I wanted to, I would no longer be able to block the dream filtering through you and exploding the net.

Memory...

You don't want

To know...

It isn't part of the *Anthropology of the Future* project.

A never-ending cycle of murder, hatred and fears...

Your own clean future is my own filthy past.

Has my memory...

Been excised too...

When the Stefan climbs down

I bang my head and hope

There's a child on the other side with a...

A recopied voice...

Where can I find my *Remembearers*?

Will they agree to *Remembear* for me?

I beam a recording of a rare theatrical performance from the twenties. The rat hardly stops laughing the whole time. The little girl returns to the pit to exterminate him. Before he dies, the rat asks why she is killing him, and the little girl answers: Laughter is not something that's given out for nothing.

Laughter

Like crying.

A strange experience.

I sensed it only through...

Will I ever cry?

Or laugh?

A little girl gives birth to a rat. The Stefan offers her his flesh in a dish adorned with crosses. A little girl eats a rat. The Stefan eats a little girl.

I had not intended to beam this ancient horror film. Where did it come from? The entire system is collapsing and the dream is pouring out through the cracks. The audience in the theater is in an uproar.

There is no little girl.

There is no rat.

End of story.

I see people holding on to their stomachs, their faces contorted. It looks like pain...

But it's...

I'll unlog in a minute. With my very own hands, I'll pull out the implachip.

K-0005275...

And it isn't enough to be dead

Because even when I am dead

It won't be over.

You're in a frenzy, Stash. Every part of your body is fighting to get rid of the dream. All I have left is a tiny particle of time in which to entrust you with my discovery. Not only in your brain, but in your heart. In every single part of your body.

I won't get another chance.

You're my stowaway. Sooner or later you'll wake up. I'm afraid of that split-second just before the final awakening. The realization. When you discover that the dream is not really yours. You won't be able to bury *Girl & Rat*, and even though you decide to try...

You'll have a tail too—

In the dark, which for you is light.

Who knows, maybe one of these days you'll thank me for *Girl & Rat*. You may even pass it on to your offspring.

To be a parent.

If I were given that chance...

With my very own womb...

As soon as you regain consciousness, I'll break through the electronic wall. I'll set out into the unknown, holding my genetic card between my fingers. It was all I had when I came into this world, and it's all I'll have when I leave too.

Feel free to use this dream to prove to the mindnet authorities that you've done all you could to stop me from going on my crazy mission, and to absolve yourself of guilt.

Final separation. We won't see each other again.

When we feel a longing for people, it doesn't come from the brain ... I know now where it comes from.

Stash...

A name that I will keep retrieving myself towards again and again...

I will remember.

This promise I'll keep.

Stash, my love, if only we could meet, body to body. Maybe some day you'll see me in a spontaneous dream of your own making. You'll follow me to No-Net-Land. Y-mee Prana is walking about, bodily. Her muscles, her tendons, her joints, her arms and legs. A womb. Internal organs that I've wandered through virtually so many times...

"Because in all your voyages you accompany yourself." The implachip flashes the words of Socrates through the memory of Seneca.

Memory – a long convoy of amputees fighting for implants.

Children of the little girl, grandchildren of the little girl, children of the grandchildren...

Of the little girl.

All of the Stefans

Somewhere

Waiting for me too.

The Madonna of the Rat Church. I'm so close. Come with me, Stash, to the No-Net-Land. My hand digs through the dirt, leafs through a packet of dusty pages, but whenever I try to work out the writing, the pages crumble and the imaging dies out.

The pages are still there. I'm sure of it. I must touch them. I need to read those ancient pages with my very own eyes.

Over the past two days, I've crammed into my brain as much as I could from the submemoryfolders in Polish, Latin, Yiddish and Hebrew. They used to write that language from right to left. The implachip lost no time switching the lobes.

This struggle to cope with the overload is tearing my brain apart. Some of all this just has to remain with you.

The pages I'll have to take in without the help of an implachip.

With my very own eyes I'll read the ancient writing. Word by word. Slowly, slowly.

Bless me...

For I have sinned...

That little girl must have had something to remember if she was struggling so hard to forget.

And maybe I do too...

And I don't even know what.

With my very own soul. I will remember.

Stash, I already know that you're engaged in a top-secret mission at the Institute's biotechnological lab to create a new body-part.

I had to break into your REMaker in order to get the password.

That is the most significant part of your future program, and you're already in the process of screening transplant candidates. At the lowest level, in a tightly sealed container, it is ready – the prototype of the soulorgan.

From the deepest folds of the body... Rising...

Outwards...

There in the dark...

Someone is laughing. I can hear it clearly.

And I hope to put down my own discovery in writing too, just as the ancients used to do. My fingers will grasp the ancient writing implement, a pencil or a pen, and my other hand will hold the paper. Slowly, slowly.

Even without the implachip I can picture your lips twitching. Stash is smirking...

Maybe I am–

She

And you are–

Who?

If only I could understand that sense of humor.

Stash, if I write to you in my own handwriting, will you read it?

A page with words on it, stained with the involuntary drippings of the body.
Perspiration, saliva, urine, blood, tears...

I've never cried. That was the first genetic repair they did on me. It's imprinted on my card.

I want so much to cry.

I'll sleep under the open skies.

Closeness

A body touching

A hand stroking – a hand hitting

I'm leaving.

Good-bye Stash.

It hurts so much...

My entire being is torn apart.

There will be light there. There will be darkness.

I pray to be able to tell the difference.

Pray?

What is praying?

If the little girl was laughing, then so can I...

Awakening

Part Five

The Diary

15 September 1943

Day of Our Lady of Sorrows

Do not bless me, Father, for I have sinned. Do not absolve me. I have been your faithful servant all my life, but now I am forsaking you and succumbing to the sin of despair. I feel sin welling up in every part of my body, and by sunrise it will permeate every cell. Do not forgive me, Father. I cannot fulfil my duty, and I have no faith. But pardon this little girl, who has no name. Because she is the unwitting source of my despair. Embrace her, and grant her salvation.

She is huddled in the wings of the church, mute as stone, and I pray in vain for slumber to engulf us both. Only the soft hand of sleep will succeed in dusting off tormented memory, suspending for a brief moment all that which had best be forgotten, and prepare the rememberer for a new day.

What new day awaits a little girl who is nothing but night?

I am Your chosen one. You have entrusted this girl-child to me, a little girl who is the source of my despair. When I first saw her, in the confessional, I asked myself whether this creature could be part of what You had wrought. Do not forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I doubted her being human. I stood there paralyzed. The black walls closed in on me, and my foot faltered on the threshold. I wanted to flee from the soundless body, with its stench of excrement, all its limbs dripping. I sought prayer, but found none. All I found was the cry that pierced through me.

My Father, what is this test that you are making me endure? Terrified, I crossed myself again and again. The farmer's wife was shouting things at me, but I could not make them out. And yet, I could not help but steal a glance at her. A pair of eyes blazed at me through the lacework screen. As if

I were standing under the cross at Golgotha, watching the man bleeding to death between two thieves.

If only I could have ripped the screen with my own bare hands, and reached out to her. Tonight, I kneel – not before you, Father, but before this child. Do not pardon me, for I denied myself to the soul floundering in the fetid flesh.

I carried her to my living quarters, but even the jostling did not elicit a sound from her. Five years old, or six. Emaciated, dishevelled, the rags sticking to her torn flesh. Her face I cannot quite discern.

A girl-child.

I had never held one in my arms.

I pray that I do not break her.

I sit in the dark, and the words pour out. A man is born into Your world as a creature of light, but other humans fill him with darkness. This is what I have preached all my life. Even I know full well what parts of the body tore through this child. My body has such a part too.

I do not know how to nurse her. It would have been better if...

No.

To pry out the nails, and to wipe away the blood.

What You are demanding is beyond my power.

I am trying to grant her some respite. Her weightless body is quivering. With whatever strength she can muster, she resists, and kicks me. For a moment I imagine myself removing Your Son from the cross.

Our Father in Heaven, O Blessed One, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Thousands of times, I have recited this prayer, but tonight the words turn into a meaningless jumble.

Our Lady of Sorrows, we call this day. Instead of remembering the sorrow of the Mother, I am immersed in the despair of the daughter.

The farmer's wife fought me, refusing to hand the girl-child over. An asset, a steady income. Her voice dripping like honey, she said: Father Stanislaw, she will defile the House of the Lord.

I'll pay you, I told her. The farmer's wife said: We are not about to slaughter the cow that gives us milk. Then she laughed: Soon there will be no trace of the Christ-killers in this world. If it weren't for our Stefan, we would have turned her in long ago. A good lad, Stefan. Knows how to appreciate a good thing. But now the Germans are offering ten thousand marks for every Jew. They posted a notice at the community house. Didn't you see it, Father Stanislaw? That's quite a sum, isn't it? We could mend the roof of the church, so it doesn't leak in winter.

To soften her heart, I addressed the farmer's wife as "My Daughter". From a secret shelf, I pulled down a golden candlestick, its base embossed with crosses. Give me the child, I said, and I will reward you.

Years ago, someone in the big city told me that Jews regard the ransom of captives as a sacrosanct commandment. Even the least remembered, after all, the unloved, are Your children. But I kept all this to myself. In a servile voice, I pleaded: Give me the child. I will know what to do with her.

The farmer's wife had trouble making up her mind, but finally she pushed the girl-child towards me. Slaughter the little Jew with your own hands, and avenge the blood of our Savior. But be careful, Father Stanislaw, make sure she doesn't infect you when you use the knife. Soon we will be celebrating a solemn mass for a world cleansed of Jews.

Her laughter thundered as she lit another candle by the altar.

Her only son was also with her in the church. A huge fellow. Big hands. Doesn't say much, darting eyes. He always kisses my hand submissively, making sure his mother sees. I baptized him on Saint Stephen's Day. He always knelt before the large crucifix, a devout expression on his face. Every Sunday, he would take his place at the head of the line leading to the confessional. May God be in your heart, and may you be truly contrite as you confess your sins – and he would whisper about small thefts. Trifling

transgressions. Last week he drank too much and got into a brawl in the neighboring village. He always confesses some service he missed, and I pardon him and send him on his way.

A girl-child.

He never mentioned her.

What he did to her in the dark was with the knowledge of his father and mother. Perhaps he bought their silence. Do not forgive me Father for my sinful thoughts. By surrendering to despair I am defying You, but as I look into the future I see nothing but death. They pushed this little girl along the path to her death, wrenching her away from her mother and father, and from everyone who loved her. I cannot fight off this despair.

Tonight I will be the message-bearer. I will announce: In the face of absolute evil, there is no escape from despair.

And yet before sin conquers me completely, I offer You a bargain. If You perform a miracle, and erase the horror from her memory, I will atone for the sin.

A sign.

I am waiting.

In vain.

A man can make a bargain with the Antichrist but not with You.

16 September 1943

I try everything. Water, bread, a blanket, but she will not let me near her. All night long I watch her, contorted in her strange position – half lying, half sitting. Protecting every part of her body, trying to keep from being noticed. Whenever I approach her, she shrinks into the little niche in the wall adjoining my quarters. I yearn to tell the huddled soul: There is a place for you in this world. If only I could promise her a place in the next world.

I kneel before the little girl who was violated in the dark. My Father, did You not see what was happening underneath the soil, or did You turn your back?

My entire life was devoted to You, drawing on my deep belief that Yours is the compassion and the goodness that I preach. It would have been better had You not separated light from darkness. If only You had left the *Tohu* and the *Bohu* – the Chaos – as they were, and not separated darkness from light, because the order you created is nothing but a delusion, luring us to believe that justice will be meted out at some other time and place. But if You do not love Your creatures, how dare You demand of us that we love one another? The true Hell is not in the world beyond this one, on the Judgment Day that I rant about from the pulpit. It is here on earth. Hell is a legend that I trade, so we can deny the Inferno we create right here with our own hands.

Empty words, spat onto a piece of paper. If I had the courage, I would demolish the church in the heart of this beautiful village. I would stand on the ruins and proclaim, for all the world to hear: Father, You have failed, and because of You we are beyond repair! You know that I have spent my entire life in awe of You. I have submitted to You at all times, accepting Your authority without question. The distance from a fear of God to a fear of men is not great, after all. Acquiescing to You or acquiescing to them – it's all the same. Perhaps I was more eager to acquiesce to them than to You. Now, despair consumes whatever fear remains within me, and sin sets me free. Tonight, and on the nights to come, You and I will conduct our reckoning.

Show me a sign, Father. Even from my abyss of despair, I have no other Father but You.

You are tarrying. Night proceeds along its tracks, dragging the wagonloads of darkness, while the little girl sprawls here, hovering between life and death.

17 September 1943

Her eyelids are shut tight. She shies away from my touch. Let her not die in my care. I pour water on her head and prod a few drops into her mouth. She hunkers in her niche like a clump of mud, but it is I who wallow. Where shall I lead despair? I who thought that suffering was not beyond my ken. In my sermons, do I not dwell on the sufferings of the Son, and insist that my

flock share in them? But tonight, I confess my ignorance. Even Your Son was not a little child when He was made to suffer.

As You led Him down the Via Dolorosa, You provided for Him. A mother to console him, an embracing father. The arms of Mary Magdalene were etched in his memory. Not a five-year-old child, but a man of thirty-three, His years as numerous as the buttons on my habit. Even then, on His final journey, He was not alone. Veronica emerged from her house and wiped His brow with a handkerchief, and Simon of Cyrene bore the cross for Him when He stumbled. His own mother fell at His feet, and mothers that He did not know lamented. “Do not weep for me, Daughter of Jerusalem,” He told them, “but for your own children.”

So many times I have tried to envisage the scene, always seeing myself as a Daughter of Jerusalem. Fortunate was Your son with so great a crowd to comfort Him in his last hour. But the little girl whom You sent to the pit is a hostage of her own loneliness. If it was not You who created this suffering, perhaps the Antichrist has prevailed, and it is his kingdom rather than Your own.

I am afraid to find out.

18 September 1943

The village is asleep. My window overlooks the hill nestling below. Wooden houses, with thatch-and-shingle roofs. Their walls are painted white, and the cornices red, like the colors of our Polish flag. All around are fields of rye and sugar beet, oats and potatoes.

My church stands in the centre of the village. Storks nest in the belfry every spring. In the shade of the pear tree I compose my sermons. For hours I observe the foliage changing hues, and I am filled with awe at the cycle of the seasons. I see the bed of nasturtiums that I planted in the garden on the day I came to serve here, many years ago. The community house and the school are on either side of the church, and on the outskirts of the village is the roadside chapel. Passersby stop, say a prayer and hang some green branches and flowers on the statue of “The Troubled Christ”.

A small place. There are many like it. Who will know its name? Who will remember? And it moves along as if there were no War raging on at all. The pigs have been fed, the cows milked, the eggs gathered from the henhouses. The people eat their little meals. But what do they hide in those basements and pits, behind their *Ave Marias*? Their daily routine deceived me, and I too was immersed in my duties and did nothing to stop the scourge.

When the German tanks arrived, I went out to greet them by the roadside shrine. I rode in the first one to the village square. There they stayed. I shook hands with the German *Commandant*, welcoming him. The entire village cheered. Conquerors come, conquerors go. How are these conquerors different from the ones who came before? I have put my trust in the Church, and I believed that if I preached mercy and compassion, I was fulfilling Your most important tenets. I pretended that there was no horror being committed – anything to spare myself the sin of despair.

And now, despair swallows me. If these are the people who sat through my sermons, and seemed to follow in my footsteps, then I am the one who deserve to be condemned: they have absorbed nothing of my preachings. Every Sunday, that farmer and his wife have been coming here, and I have given them the bread and the wine so that they may enter into Holy Communion with Your Son, but all this time they were devouring the flesh of that child, sucking her blood. And I knew nothing of it.

I chose not to know.

19 September 1943

St Thomas Aquinas was right: despair leads to hatred, unbridled fury and bloodthirstiness. I kneel at her side, and imagine my hands around the neck of the farmer's son. I take pleasure in envisaging his death, watching as he flails his arms and gasps his last. And You too, why didn't you just kill her, and be done with it? You would have spared her a life filled with the memory of the Stefan inside her.

I refuse to grant pardon. I will not turn the other cheek.

I close the pages, and cover the child with another blanket. The support of the body I can attend to, but not the needs of what lies inside it.

Whom should I pray to?

20 September 1943

Another day has gone by, and her condition is unchanged. I carry out my duties, hearing confessions, performing rites. And from time to time I return to my quarters in the back, kneeling at her side, and listen to her breathing. She is still alive, but it is as if she has lost consciousness. I listen. Maybe she will mumble something. But her lips are sealed. I give her some water. Her lips do not move. I push a spoon into her mouth, trying to feed her some potato soup. She convulses and spits it out.

Again I sit in the dark. My hand moves, but I cannot see the letters. Her presence in the darkness grows more and more intense. She is afraid of me. Nobody has ever been afraid of me before. Even the dogs give a friendly bark when I pass them in the village, and the pigs sniff at my heels. Maybe she recognizes the Antichrist in me. If she'd come out of purgatory, I would know how to offer her solace. But she was among human beings, in their care and under their wings. You have given me the weapons to confront the Antichrist, but in the face of those who were created in Your image I am helpless. If everything has been wrought by You, then despair too comes from You.

If only I could perform a miracle in Your name. But You have no name, and there are no miracles in Your world.

Light is breaking now, but it cannot dispel the darkness.

21 September 1943

This morning she allows me to clean her with a damp rag. I dip it, and the water in the basin blackens. I pump some more water from near the giant trough. I cook pieces of birch bark and wash off her wounds. First I peel off the rags that stick to them, begging her forgiveness for the pain I am causing her, but she has yet to make a sound. The dirt covering her is Yours, Father. Even Lazarus lay on the ground in his shrouds, his body cleansed and anointed with perfumes.

I cut her hair, rinse her scalp with kerosene. I will not hurt you, I tell her. In this house you are safe. She turns her back to me at once. Finally she pillories me with her stare. Deep in their sockets are an old-woman's eyes. They remind me of...

No. I refuse to remember.

Her skin has been gnawed. Bite-marks, bruises and lesions. She is covered with sores, but the flesh has the power to heal itself. I rub the wounds with herbal salves, concocted from the plants I grow on the outskirts of the cemetery. Our supplies of medications ran out long ago. She is burning with fever. Her breathing is irregular. I change the bandages, wrap her in all the blankets I own, and keep silent.

Keeping silent. That is the only thing I do well.

Saint Stanislaw, you who once rescued a little boy who fell into the well, Patron of the Broken Limbs, help me. For you too are human.

Father who art in Heaven, if I knew that You too are in despair, I would despair less.

22 September 1943

I take her in my arms, covering her private parts with my shirt, and dip her in the barrel after heating the water with hot bricks.

Don't be alarmed, little girl. On the second day, the Almighty separated the water under the vault from the water above it. Then He commanded the waters to be gathered. In your body too the water is gathered. Now I have added honey and the leaves of the hazelnut tree and thyme to make you strong.

The little girl is trembling, and the basin shakes. Some of the water spills. I swaddle her sore-covered body with a black cloth, the way they once shrouded the lepers.

23 September 1943

In a back closet I found some novice's outfits. They are too big. I sit in the dark and alter them. My movements are clumsy, and I prick my fingers with the needle. I can feel the blood running, but don't bother to wipe it up. If asked, I will explain to the villagers that I have taken in a relative whose mother was killed in the bombings and whose father is a soldier who has been missing for two years.

A few short days that she's been here with me, and already everything is different. I am a stranger to myself. A child in a house which never saw any. I have not known a woman, and have not begotten children. My loins are dry. Years ago I took the vow of celibacy. Who will teach me how to take care of her? Even Adam learned how to be a son before becoming a father, and Christ was never a father, but he was a son, and I, who have been neither son nor father, how will I know?

During my studies at the seminary I had a dream, night after night: I am a white-haired old man, sitting in a well-lit room. Before me is my small grandson, holding a notebook on his lap, and writing something. In my dream I know that the words he is writing do not come from me, since I am silent. And even when I want to speak to him, to utter some words of affection, I am struck dumb. My heart pours out to the child, but I'm a captive of my silence. Even my arms, which long to embrace him, are paralyzed. When I woke, overcome by guilt, I hurried to the father confessor. The urge to beget a child cannot be undone overnight, he used to tell me.

It took many confessions to erase that dream...

24 September 1943

She shies away from the light. Even the faintest disturbs her. I've drawn the curtains, so that not even the moonlight can shine through. I've blown out all the candles – but even in the darkness she cringes when I come close to her. My questions go unanswered. I asked her for her name. I begged. Her stubborn refusal was an encouraging sign. Maybe she has not lost the spark of rebelliousness, and a tiny flame of life continues to flicker. Could it be that she has forgotten who she is? Or maybe she has been rendered speechless? In our village, children are forbidden to look in the mirror, lest

they be struck dumb as adults. But this child did not see her reflection in the pit. Rather, the body of evil beat against her. I am not the evil one, I promise her over and over. I know she can hear me.

How can I rake off the black filth that has clung to her spirit? No prayer will do.

In my helplessness, perhaps being foolish, I tell her about my own childhood, lending her some memories of my own for the time being. This is my bed, and there are the quilts, filled with goose down. So soft. Embroidered with lace. I thread my fingers through the fine lacework, afraid to tear it. Those are my slippers, always laid out on the rug. Don't walk barefoot, Stanislaw, or you'll catch cold. I didn't have a birthday cake. Another child blows out the candles one by one, instead of blowing them out all at once. Someone laughs. Maybe it's my grandmother. A rocking-horse is what the little boy received as a present, and for me an illuminated copy of the Old Testament. Moses climbing down the Mount with the tablets in his hands. His expression is stern but compassionate. That must be what my father looked like ... Him I never saw.

I stick to the good memories, and bury the rest. My mother ambles through them, but I dare not mention her.

Mother – a painful memory. Mustn't even think of it. Sleep evades me. So long as the child is awake, I am destined to stay awake too. All night long I sit at her feet and write. My body disappears. Even my hands are engulfed. Only the whiteness of my diary pages would shine in the darkness.

25 September 1943

Today she took a few bites of food. Slowly I fed her some oatmeal, and she did not throw up. I asked my congregation for a chicken and some eggs, and they stared at me. Never before had I requested an offering of food. I said, it's because of the War. You would not want a minister who is hungry and weak. Eventually, Zosha the innkeeper brought me a drumstick and an egg. In return, I blessed her and her family for seven generations to come.

The child's sores are beginning to heal. I remove the bandages and struggle to give hope. Soon you will stand on your own. Soon you will play, the way

children do. But the promise rings false, even to me.

It is only because of her that I have come to think back to that distant province called childhood. Naively, I thought that the infant years were the same for everyone. Boundless tenderness and warmth are lavished on the small child. Why then does everything come undone?

When does the sweet, rosy-cheeked child turn into a predator?

Like the Stefan.

26 September 1943

What remains of her childhood? I do not know what is stored in the tiny memory sprawled out beside me. Who will help me plant the seeds of innocence within her? The soft blanket with which I cover her, the flame forming a shadow on the wall, the food I bring to her mouth – where does the comfort of fragmented memory begin? Is there any spike left to latch on to, any echo of the little joys in her distant past? Of a father's embrace? A mother holding out her arms? A cookie with a glass of milk, or a doll, or a birthday cake? Where are the goodnight kiss and the lullaby hidden? I try to retrieve them from my own memory. All I need to do is to tug the thread of a single memory, and others follow. A second one, and a third, and the entire skein of memories unwinds, allowing me to take hold of things without which I would not be what I am. The sordid memories I cast aside, because they too threaten to cross the threshold. Like the Angel Gabriel, I weigh the good fragments against the bad ones and look at the scales to see whether they have been tipped.

If she had the memories of someone else, then...

27 September 1943

I covered her in the clothing of a novice, and pulled the hood over her head. There was no need to instruct her to hide from strangers. Her senses have grown sharp. Her silence is complete. When I hang the cross from her neck, she swings it wildly. It's if she is trying to remove a noose. It will protect you, I explain, for now.

I ask: what shall I call you? Tell me. I swear I will keep your name to myself.

As soon as I asked her what name her mother had used, she turned her back.
I dropped it.

29 September 1943

Day of the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael

I almost succeeded in wiping out the memory of myself crying. Even when my grandmother...

I was not there with her when she died.

The little girl doesn't cry.

Even animals cry.

4 October 1943

Day of St Francis of Assisi

Slowly she feels her way. First, she ventures out of the niche. Then she starts walking gingerly through my quarters. Suddenly I am made to realize how bare the walls are, apart from the crucifix over my bed. A bleak little room. Asceticism can be unsettling. I hurry to remove the icons from the dusty shelves in the sacristy, and scatter them in the corners. A child needs pretty things to look at, I rationalize for my own sake and for the painted saints, the only humans I trust.

From time to time, she steals a glance at the icons, but leans tightly against the wall of her niche, so as to leave it free.

At night I discover that she is riveted by the painting of the nativity in Bethlehem. She traces the ox and the donkey, then carefully places the icon on the wooden floor, and arches her back.

You should have put her in a nunnery. If only I had a womb...

7 October 1943

Day of Our Lady of the Rosary

I gave the little girl the crucifix hanging over my bed. I turned it over, flung it in the air and caught it, but she refuses to play with it. The painting of Mother and Child she relinquished at once. With great effort I managed to push a rosary in-between her fingers. I let roll the words of St Francis for her. Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury – pardon. Where there is doubt – faith. Where there is despair – hope. Where there is darkness – light. And where there is sadness – joy.

I pause. Repeat after me, little girl. If we recite these words again and again, we may come to believe in them. Together, we may struggle to believe, for alone there is no faith.

An echo returns, mocking and garbled. Though her body has started moving again, her mouth is still sealed. When it is time to sleep, she clings to the wall of the niche. As if her very presence, here or anywhere, is in doubt.

15 October 1943

Though she remains silent, she moves about in the church. Even the fringes of her garment flutter voicelessly. She has blended in, as if she has been here forever. Even when I am performing my duties in the front part of the church, I can feel her presence in the back. This morning she polished the wooden floor, and put fresh water in the flower vases. Then she dusted the large crucifix in front of the altar. She could not reach as high as His nailed hands. Maybe she was avoiding them.

When a member of the congregation is about to enter, she can tell in time, and vanishes as if the earth has swallowed her. The region is infested with informers, and I know that my habit will not guarantee my immunity. If the

child is found out, I will pay with my life. And what would become of her then?

And yet, I am more afraid of life than of death.

The world around us is asleep. Not a cock crows, not a dog barks, and even the night predators have stopped preying. I place her on my mattress, but she slips back into the niche. Her eyes are burning. What does she see in the dark? If only I knew how to excise the malignant memory from within her.

Memory. The most painful member of the body. Almost as painful as the event that caused it.

How can I know the feelings of a person whose memories have been wrenched away? My mother jabbed a pin in her body. She swallowed a concoction of gunpowder, vodka and ashes, to rid her body of me. And who was my father?

I jump off my mattress and rush outside to vomit.

1 November 1943

All Saints' Day

I toss and turn. Every part of my body is aching for sleep, but as soon as I dare shut my eyes, I am overcome by memories of the future, of events that are liable to happen any moment. The murderers will break into the church. They will kick in the door, shatter the holy vessels and drown her in the baptismal font. "Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." I leap up, thrust my kneecaps onto the wooden floor, and frantically repeat the words of St Paul in his epistle to the Corinthians. What else do I have but the prayers I have recited my whole life? For lack of anything better, I latch onto them, trying to persuade myself that they were written by humans like myself – pathetic creatures surrendering their spirit and their body to despair.

2 November 1943

All Souls' Day

When will she speak? I am afraid she will never make a sound. That is why I cannot give up, but the healing memories do not come easily, and I am forced to pursue them in every recess of myself. My grandmother did not buy me toys. She could not afford them. To console me she would say: Whoever laughs too much will cry later on. I would pull the cushion over my head to dispel the vague suspicion I could not help feeling. There will be nobody there with me in moments of anguish. At the time, I was not able to give it a name. Even at the seminary, I would secretly hold on to the blanket, pretending to be clinging to the chair of the Holy Mother. I buried my face in the wall, so they would not hear me weeping. I would do anything for you, Mother, if only you would allow me to be close to you. I am so frightened, but not allowed to admit it. I want to go home.

Now all the memories come back to haunt me. Tonight is the night when the dead return to earth, and visit their former homes. As for me, if I were to return to my childhood village, perhaps my grandmother would appear again.

The ghost of my mother too.

The beggars have gathered in two rows in front of the church, and all of the villagers have given alms. The women feed them small loaves of bread.

At midnight a great light will shine in the church. And I am waiting for the dead souls to kneel in prayer before the altar. I wait in vain. This church they will not visit. Every door and window in the village has been opened to receive them. From every direction there are cries of "Holy sainted ancestors, we beg you to fly to us and eat and drink whatever the Lord has granted us."

Hospitality for the dead, while the living have the door slammed in their faces.

The little girl listened. I could almost hear her voice. How it is still caged inside her.

10 November 1943

For the past few nights she's been taking apart the wooden floorboards and digging in the dirt underneath. And although I cannot fathom why she does it, I feel a strange sense of relief. Maybe she's looking for something.

I've long since stopped asking You for omens, and I grope for them myself. I look at the child moving a fistful of earth, packing it between her fingers. As a child, I used to play with mud too. My grandmother would scold me: Don't get dirty, Stanislaw. God sees you everywhere.

The little girl kneads the earth, shaping it like clay. She tears off a piece of the bread I gave her, and stuffs it inside. The earth crumbles, and she packs it again. Her little hands are swallowed in the clump of earth. What does she create? Be careful, Stanislaw, God is in the mud too. He is following you, whatever you do. Now, not on the Last Judgment Day.

Suddenly something rises to the top. She leans over, and still does not utter a sound. Moves her lips closer to the earth. Dips her face in it, rubbing it over her bristling scalp. I am overwhelmed, but I do not know with what. Perhaps it is the sin that blinds me.

What is the thing that flickers in the vestiges of her memory? Even if I had been a witness to Creation itself, I would not have understood it.

Why did you entrust this child to an ignoramus?

11 November 1943

St Martin's Day

Whatever few stories I still recall were told to me by my grandmother. On winter nights, she would sit in her rocking chair, patching clothes or spinning yarn and talking about the lives of the saints. I told the little girl, if St Martin comes riding on his white horse, it will be an omen that we too will be covered by snow.

She cringed in the niche that she dug in my quarters, and covered her hair with dirt. I barely managed to pull her out of there so she could breathe.

In church, I gave my sermon. Today we begin preparing for Christmas. Time for soul-searching and for readying ourselves for the Second Coming.

The farmer's wife stiffens. The Savior has already come. Here is the proof. The Jews are all dead. And you, Father Stanislaw, have you kept your promise yet?

1 December 1943

I have dismantled all of the floorboards in my quarters, and in the niche.

I grovel in the dirt. I dig in myself. At night I rest beside her in the niche, until finally we both fall asleep. This diary too is being written in the dirt, tattered and stained. Sometimes I gnaw at the pages with my teeth. In the dark, on my stomach. The dirt works its way under my skin, tingling beneath my habit. I've grown accustomed to the taste. It's part of me now. I breathe in the dirt, and do not choke.

The two of us wallow in it, and I believe she is finally beginning to recover.

Ave Maria of the dust-dwellers. Blessed is the fruit of Thy dust. Amen.

4 December 1943

Whatever it takes to erase her memory, I'll do.

I get down on all fours.

I crawl.

I wag a tail.

I burrow.

When she taps her fingers, I thrash with my claws. I leap up.

When she motions me to move back, I keep my distance.

Who am I?

In whose image am I being created now?

It is not You but I who must search the depths.

I am no longer in need of comforting memories from some buried past.
Like the bed of nasturtiums I planted in the garden years ago, we are
growing new memories now. Our own making.

6 December 1943

St Nicholas' Day

It is getting cold. I heat the stove with logs I gathered in the forest before nightfall. When I return, I see her little face, pressed against the glass with its frosty floral sheath. I told her, the last deed of the Almighty was to send flowers to earth. But since he created too many of them, some had to go. The Holy Mother took pity on them and said, I will give the leftover flowers to the humans. They will stick to the windows on cold days, and give people a touch of happiness.

I can read the question in the little girl's eyes.

Father, who art in Heaven, was I ever happy? Every night I talk to her and to You. I've grown used to the sound of my own voice. The howling of wolves reaches us from the forest. Saint Nicholas, patron of the herds, bring the keys from Paradise, and lock the jaws of the wolf.

They play *Catch the Wolf* in our village. Whoever catches all of the geese is the winner. This is a game I never played.

The little girl lies quietly in her niche, as if she knows the rules of the game.

25 December 1943

Christmas Day

The church bells chime at midnight. The church is packed. I carry the holy bread over to the altar. Take this, all of you and eat it. This is My body which will be given up for you. Then I raise the wine glass. Take this, all of

you and drink from it: this is the cup of My blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.

After the festive mass, the members of the congregation file past me and shake my hand. That was a fine sermon, Father Stanislaw. People from the neighboring villages came to listen too. But who will deliver the true sermon? Even the Holy See in Rome is keeping silent. And who will cry out in Your name that our churches must offer refuge?

If only I could shake the congregants in their pews as they offer their devout supplication. If only I could tell them: the Jews are part of the body of mankind. This part cannot be severed. That is the pit that all of us came from. Remember how you invite anyone who is hungry to join you in your holiday meal, and you even say: A guest in our home is God in our home. After the meal you will pull the bundles of straw out from under the tablecloth, a symbolic wish for longevity. If only they knew what I want to wish them, protected by my sacred vestments. Yes, they look up to me and they trust in me, but in fact I am their hostage.

I want to scream: Look at those who march along the Via Dolorosa. See fathers and mothers and children. They beg for a measure of compassion, and you, who call yourselves true Christians, turn your backs on them. Of all these admonitions, not a word passed my lips.

The farmer and his wife were sitting in the front pew, with their son by their side. Had I denounced them in public, the little girl's fate would have been sealed. All day long she was at it, spreading fresh branches of spruce in the furthermost corners. I asked her to save her strength, but she ignored me. She sat there facing the crack in the wall, waiting for the Star of Bethlehem. During the Christmas mass, she hid in her niche. I hung the Christmas tree upside down from the ceiling, but I could not muster the strength of spirit to decorate it.

Perhaps because she was so tired, she agreed for the first time to sleep on my mattress. Her curls which have started to grow back rested on my pillow. Under the hairline, I could see the scars. Her lips moved. I recognized the Latin slipping out.

The clearing in the forest facing me is covered with snow. The frost has glazed the puddles, and everything is shiny as a mirror. Even the animals can open their mouths and speak tonight, but only those who are without sin can understand. People talk about a farmer who eavesdropped on the conversation of a pair of his oxen and heard them speak of his impending death. Tonight, even the bells in the frozen riverbeds are groaning. I want to groan along with them, but I cannot. The stars over the fields are bright. Their light I use to write these entries.

The beauty of the tall cypresses and of the untrodden snow is so painful. If the world were to show its ugliness now, our bells would sound a warning. But You have covered Your world in a sheath of beauty, to keep us immersed in utter ignorance. As for me, I have chosen to confine myself to the protected side of this covering, and to turn my back on the hidden *Tohu* and *Bohu* that are beyond my grasp.

I do not question Your existence, Father. You exist, as I do. I was created in Your image – cowardly, selfish and weak. The dead light of the stars bears witness.

Dawn is here, and the pale light puts a new coat of paint on the heavens. All this beauty. The letters under my hand are becoming clearer. I hear a voice. Or do I? Maybe I'm suffering from delusions, brought on by fatigue or madness.

Stash.

I fall to the ground at the little girl's feet.

Stash.

This single word embraces the tip of a comforting memory.

Maybe You do eavesdrop, after all.

Be that as it may, I shall be her Stash.

26 December 1943

St Stephen's Day

All day long, they sing hymns of childbirth. Our farmers throw seeds at one another, auguring a fine crop. When I sprinkle the holy waters, the farmer's son throws fistfuls of barley and oats at me, and shouts: Today is my birthday, you know!

Today slave and master are equal and all men are free. That is what I told the little girl.

Stash, she utters, no longer mute. Her entire vocabulary is one word.

Stash.

I carry this word. My only prayer.

28 December 1943

Holy Innocents' Day

This morning, in the middle of mass, the soldiers arrived. A young officer broke away from the group, crossed himself quickly, but did not kneel. He was wearing a long grey coat which covered the tops of his boots, and a grey helmet. He pointed his rifle at my chest. A calm overtook me. If she has been sentenced to die, at least she will not die alone.

They marched between the pews, crawled underneath, inspected the icons and the holy vessels. They fingered the large crucifix from side to side and from top to bottom, as if someone was hiding there. I wrapped my arms around the altar under which she was hiding, knowing she would not make a sound. Her gift for silence is perfect. I walked the Germans to the door, and slowly closed it behind me. They walked away. The young officer stalled for a moment, then crossed himself.

I heaved a sigh of relief. At the nearby cemetery I spotted the farmer's son hunkering down between the tombstones. When he saw me he made a *Sieg Heil* salute, then left.

31 December 1943

St Sylvester's Day

It's cold in the dirt tonight. Her teeth are chattering. I rake up mounds of earth to cover us both, and tell her another story I heard from my grandmother. When the Holy Mother was fleeing to Egypt with Baby Christ, for fear of Herod's soldiers, she came across a farmer sowing his wheat. She took a seed sack from him, sowed his field with her own hands, and promised him: You will harvest tomorrow. The following morning, when the farmer harvested his miraculous crop, soldiers came by and questioned him about the mother and child. The farmer replied: Yes, I saw them, but that was many days ago, when I was sowing my field. The soldiers gave up their pursuit, and left – and the child was saved. For the time being.

The ending I do not tell her, for I'm sure she knows.

1 January 1944

Stash.

She brings her dirt-soiled hand closer, and the word comes out, riding on a clear voice. Only when her small finger touches my cheek do I realize that I am crying. She leans over me, perhaps in fear, or taken aback. I take her finger and trace the muddy line formed by the tears on my cheek, praying that some day I will be able to wipe her own tears away.

If she cries, perhaps a day will come when she will be able to laugh too.

6 January 1944

Epiphany

Tell me more, Stash.

I whisper: That day, three kings of the East came to Bethlehem, to bow to the King born to the Jews.

She hurls a fistful of dirt at me, enraged.

Not the Jews. You're lying, Stash.

It is believed that God himself walks the earth during this time of year – the days between the birth of Christ and His baptism – keenly watching us.

I don't believe it – because if You saw what I see, You would demolish the world. But maybe You too are in their hands.

2 February 1944

Candlemas Day

Holy Mother, Our Lady of the Candles, you know best what it means to be impure, cast out from all the rest. For forty days after the birth you were forbidden to speak to anyone, even to those who are most precious to you. After all, if a woman dies before the purification ceremony, she changes into a *Mamuna*, a witch who snatches babies and replaces them with the warped fruit of her own womb.

The farmers brought their candles to the church, for me to say a blessing. Then they set out in a procession towards their homes, carrying the flames and shielding them from the wind, since a flame that goes out is a bad omen. Tonight they will spread the sacred light throughout their homesteads. They will place the candle on the wall over the bed and will guard it for an entire year. It will be placed in the hands of the dying, to ease the agony of passing from this world.

Stash.

Only when the little girl speaks do I feel alive.

5 February 1944

Today I read to her from the Old Testament. I crawl along, hunching my back, waving a tail like a rat and recording the letters in the dirt to teach her to read and write. In the beginning, God created the Heaven and the Earth. She imitates me. Suddenly, she stops, her legs in mid-air.

Tell me a different story.

She shakes her curls. I want to stroke them, but do not dare.

I mustn't evoke any memory of the Stefan.

There is no other story. That is how it all began. In the beginning, our Father created...

She cuts me short.

Stash, promise me He isn't a Jew.

I reply: He is what He is, and He has no name.

16 February 1944

Ash Wednesday

On the day marking the commencement of Lent, I sprinkle ashes on the heads of the congregants, and make the sign of a cross on their brows. My body performs the ritual perfectly, but my spirit wanders. Who is this strange man carrying out his duties so cordially? They know nothing of my true nature.

My inner self was aflame at the thought that they were branding their fellow humans. Abstaining from eating meat, yet devouring human flesh.

For a moment I imagined You, Father, covering Your body in the dirt.

When I turn the pages of my diary, I discover the passage of time outside, so different from the clock that the little girl and I share. With all the power that I possess, I will try to drive the timepiece of her memory off course.

22 February 1944

Day of St Peter's Chair

What is a miracle? she asks.

Something unusual, that never happened before.

Who causes miracles?

God.

And who is God?

Our Father.

And where is He?

In Heaven.

Heaven – is that above us or below us?

I don't know.

When does He make the miracle?

When He decides to intervene.

And if we become Father and Mother ourselves, will we be able to intervene?

I say nothing.

23 February 1944

And where are His father and mother?

I dig in.

You don't know anything, Stash.

She is so disillusioned. She pushes me into the niche. I lie there. My ears are always attuned to echoes, so I will be able to detect the enemy.

29 February 1944

I hop.

I sniff.

My whiskers twitch.

My ears are upright.

I beat my hairless tail against the walls.

I am her human rat.

I pad our den with leaves – a warm cradle for our young. My teeth keep growing, which is why I must keep gnawing.

All this time I go on looking for escape routes, because our very lives depend on them.

7 March 1944

St Thomas Aquinas' Day

When he was the age of the little girl, Thomas Aquinas asked his teacher: What is God? He too had been forcibly separated from his mother, and had been taken captive.

So what? Is this a way of telling me that there is nothing new under the sun?

19 March 1944

St Joseph's Day

If those are the questions that children ask, what do their parents reply? I don't know what the carpenter Joseph told the little boy that he adopted in Nazareth, when the child asked the meaning of a nasty word whispered behind his back. Maybe the boy shed his tears in secret. There is nothing in the Evangelists about the child's hurt.

All winter she asked. Plainly, matter-of-factly. Where do we come from? What was here before us? What will there be here after we're gone? And I did not have the answers.

We climb up the stairs to the belfry. I want to show her the world. First, she walled herself in. I devised ways of luring her out of the niche. As we climb up, her body starts to tremble. I recognize her fear of heights immediately.

She is dizzy, and her body reaches out for something to lean on. When I hold out my arms, she turns her back and starts running down the stairs. I swear, Stash will not let you fall, child.

She walks by my side, apprehensive. Are we there yet? she asks. When will we get there?

From behind the belfry wall she watches children skating on the icy lake. A bevy of spots circling on the glaring white surface. We cannot see their faces, but I recognize them anyway. That's the blacksmith's son, and that's the innkeeper's daughter. I baptized all of them. A child needs the company of other children, which is why I try to be a child to her as well.

The parents of the children in the village where I grew up forbade their children to include me in their games. They pointed at me, and whispered. For many years, I had no idea what they were saying.

Bastard. A boy with no name. Now the dagger of memory returns, stabbing me.

“Mother hen cooked some porridge. She fed this one. And this one. But she pulled this one’s head off. And fru-fru-flew away...” How can I remember what nobody ever told me? I was the shameful evidence of my mother’s corporeal sin.

Although the little girl is fascinated with the sight of the children skating, she wants to go back down. And I did not tell her that there are places that one should avoid because the ice is too thin.

25 March 1944

Day of Annunciation of the Lord

This day will be called The Day of Our Lady of the Brook, because the ice is beginning to crack. The Holy Mother will open up the covering of the earth, and will breathe life back into all those who sleep below.

Sleeping below?

Whenever I think that I've succeeded in prodding her onto the road to recovery, suddenly the malignant memory slashes through and pushes her all the way back.

How will I find a message of hope to convey to this child?

27 March 1944

Nothing will make them abandon their rituals. This year, like every other, they set out for the carnival, carrying likenesses of the horse and the goat and the rooster, and with them the effigy of Marzanna, Goddess of Death. Generations of Christian faith have not succeeded in eradicating that ancient memory. I often think that my mission was futile from the very start. In the evening, men and women will gather at the inn for an auction of matings. Years ago, my father chose an innocent girl, and took her to the haystack, where he inspected her teeth and her nose and later her other parts too. I do not know whether upon returning to the inn they exchanged coins and colored Easter eggs, as evidence that the transaction had been finalized, nor at what point she was banished in disgrace, leaving me in the care of her mother. The stories that a child seeks are precisely the ones not intended for his ears.

I will not let You hurt this child, Father. If I cannot erase the evil deeds from her memory, I can at least rid her of the nasty names.

Even while she seems to be healing, I am in a constant state of despair.

2 April 1944

Palm Sunday – a week before Easter

The children of Jerusalem greeted even the donkey of Christ by spreading out their coats at the gate to the city. Commotion in the church. Today the farmers come and go, willow branches in their hands, and I say the blessing. They were picked in the first week of Lent and left to soak so that their buds may open on this very day. St Jerzy opens even the jaws of the

frogs with his keys, as I explained to the little girl who was frightened by the croaking.

Flogging the congregants. For them, it is a way of inducing health and prosperity. The women will beat the members of their family with gooseberry twigs until they cry in memory of the crown of thorns. I flog them till they bleed. Despair has its rewards, Father. It gives me strength.

At the pig-slaughtering ceremony, the men place the animal on a special platform. They turn the suckling pig on its back, and grab it by the legs. The farmer gave me the honor of holding the tail of the floundering animal as he stabbed a sharp knife in its throat. The farmer's wife presided over the women who were draining the blood into a bowl, to be used in the preparation of sausages and salty meat delicacies. In the evening, they sent me pig's liver mixed with buckwheat. I buried it in the bed of nasturtiums. The little girl's eyes looked longingly, but I was determined.

We will have no part of this forbidden meat.

3 April 1944

Monday before Easter

Late at night they came banging on the church doors. Instantly, the little girl hid in her dugout and was silent. She knows how to keep her very breath from making a sound. In haste, I put on my habit. I could barely button it. I kept thinking that someone – whoever it may be – has found out and informed. But I discovered that I was being summoned to perform extreme unction.

I retraced my steps. This was the first time I had no choice but to leave her alone at night. I promised her: Stash will return. I let my tail swoosh loosely along the ground, but she turned her back.

At the dying man's bedside I was asked why my habit was covered in dirt. The farmer's son was there in the doorway too. Murderers can be recognized by their lack of a shadow, but behind Your back a new breed has evolved, with shadows larger than their bodies.

4 April 1944

Tuesday before Easter

Inside the coffin lies the oldest man in our village, and beside him is the comb he used on his hair, and the needle used for sewing his shrouds, as well as a handful of coins – entrance fee into the next world.

The mourners are delighted, since these are the most auspicious days for dying. All of the graves are wide open, and the soil will not weigh down on the dead person. That was one lucky man, that Antek, they tell each other. Dying in the week that commemorates the dead – that's no trifling matter.

People here tell the story of a farmer who disobeyed the rule about refraining from all work during this Holy Week, and was swallowed up by the earth, plow and all. Whenever a carriage enters the cemetery, the mourners riding in it cross themselves, because they imagine that the dead man's shouts for help are rising from under the wagon wheels.

Three times I sprinkled dirt on the coffin and extended my wishes to the dead man. After leaving the cemetery, the mourners did not look back. I refused to attend the wake. I remained on my own by the fresh grave, thinking about death, in the form of a tall woman draped in white. Once a farmer locked her in a tobacco box for seven years, until the earth complained that it could no longer bear the weight of the humans, and the farmer was forced to release her. These are stories I never tell the little girl.

Through the crack in the wall, she followed the coffin adorned with flowers, watching as it was lowered ever so slowly.

Where are the dead, Stash?

I don't know.

She rummaged in the dirt, pulled out a piece of charcoal, and drew a line on the wall.

Who knows?

I don't know.

If they are below, then why didn't I see them?

I would like to console her by saying that her father and mother still exist too, somewhere, but I must obscure them in her memory to keep her from being engulfed by her grief over their loss. And as I make my notes, I realize that perhaps it is the sin of despair that causes me to pillage her parents' memory in such a way, because I am competing with them for her love.

This love I want to keep to myself.

Do not forgive me, Father. I am not worthy.

7 April 1944

Good Friday

They brought their food to church in baskets. Then I went from house to house, from table to table, bestowing my blessings.

The more I become Stash, the emptier her memory becomes, and the fuller my own. What was wrought upon her in the dark is branded into me. I carry the burn for her now.

I force myself to refrain from vomiting in her presence.

9 April 1944

Easter

Before the Resurrection Mass, the men fired in the air as a sign of rejoicing. I covered the little girl's ears.

At dawn, right after the service, they burst through the gate, led by the farmer's son who pushed all the others out of the way. After all, the first one to reach home will harvest his crop before all the others.

The little girl and I sit on the ground eating Easter eggs. The shells we will hang from my pear tree as a symbol of fertility.

The customs are ingrained in me, Little Girl. If I deviate from them, I will be endangering your life. If only I knew how to figure out the dates of the Jewish holidays. My memory is too sparse, and I have nobody to ask. There are rumors ... unthinkable. The mind cannot grasp such horror.

Let Easter be Passover, Little Girl.

Let Pentecost be the Jewish Feast of Harvest.

Let the Sunday be the Sabbath.

1 May 1944

The farmer's wife came to church this morning. People in the village gossip about the couple's new wealth. They've bought another plot, and now their land extends all the way to the forest.

With a proud stride she marched right up to the altar, and announced that she had found a worthy mate for her son. Having searched in vain in our own village, she had turned to another nearby, and discovered a bride who was in a class befitting their own newly acquired status. She had sent her son to lay soft birch branches on the threshold of the girl's house, a symbol of his intentions. The farmer's wife asked me to schedule the ceremony.

How can I pronounce the wedding vows for this man, whose very name is too profane for me to utter.

What he did to the little girl in the dark.

The farmer and his wife had been childless for many years. For the sake of procreation, they had fasted and had given generous offerings and other gifts. Eventually they made a pilgrimage to the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, who answered their prayers. There isn't a soul in the village who does not remember the baptism of this son.

If only I could add to the Scriptures "a seed for a seed". How can you ask me to bless him and his wife-to-be? May his children be damned, and cursed be his name.

The farmers are celebrating outside. They have tied scented reeds and ash branches to their hair, and have launched a procession, carrying an effigy of the Princess of May, in green clothing.

Come out to us, Father Stanislaw. The fragrance of spring is in the air. Everything has been created anew. Their spring is my eternal winter. Do not forgive me, Father. I am beyond hope.

I hide between the branches and relieve myself.

3 May 1944

Feast of the Virgin Mary

The first day of sowing. The farmers are out in their Sunday best. They waited for me to bless their seeds before setting out towards the fields, mimicking the movements of my hand as it sprinkles the Holy Water.

Today I baptized the youngest son of Zbyszek the blacksmith. He was actually born on Sunday, but he couldn't be baptized on a Sunday, or else he would spend his whole life seeing death coming to snatch its victims.

On their way out, the congregants chanted: "My dear kinsmen, we are back from Church. We took a little Jew. We bring back an angel."

What is the matter with you, Father Stanislaw? Come celebrate with us. We have not had such joyous tidings since the angel Gabriel delivered the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. With my very own eyes I saw the Jews being taken in freight cars to their deaths. A great celebration in the heavens above.

Zosha the innkeeper calls Zbyszek the blacksmith a rumormonger, and says he drank too much.

I return to the empty church, and fall on my knees.

What do you see, Stash? What do people see if they've been blind since birth?

Christ and the Mother Mary divested of their clothing, huddling with the rest of the group, waiting in silence for their turn. First on death row.

On the ground I inscribe the words: King and Queen of the Jews. In the morning, the little girl will erase it all as she hops about.

4 June 1944

Pentecost is over, and the Feast of the Holy Trinity has arrived. The shorter the nights, the more apprehensive she becomes. It seems that only in the dark does she feel safe. I tell her that the light-giving heavenly bodies were created on the fourth day. Here is the light of the stars, Little Girl. It has come a long way, and now it is reaching us...

She covers her eyes.

If I were in Your place, Father, I would turn off all the stars for her sake.

8 June 1944

Corpus Christi

We roll on the ground, spreading dirt around us. She pulls at my tail.

Stash, you're the best rat in the world.

It's my body that is being jostled. My guts are in a knot. My mouth opens wide.

Alarmed, she quickly retreats into the niche.

What was that sound you made, Stash?

I am laughing, Child.

What does laughing mean? she asks.

Then she says: Teach me, please.

24 June 1944

St John the Baptist's Day

It is the height of summer. The earth becomes transparent and shows up the riches in its depths, glowing with celestial fire. That is what my grandmother told me. I never dared to ask where my mother was.

The old woman also told me about a rare flower that grows somewhere in the mountains, protected by evil spirits. Anyone who succeeds in picking it will gain happiness. I sprayed holy water on the horns of the goats, festooned with wreaths of alfalfa, and on the geese with garlands of daisies round their necks.

Little Girl, even the sun is going to dip in the river today. It capers through the heavens in honor of St John. The village girls dance and sing: "Play with us, for we are your sunshine." As the sun sets, they quickly gather camomile for medicinal uses.

There are birch branches hanging in every cowshed tonight, to ward off the witches who gather on bald mountains and plot to steal the cows' milk.

Everything that I see I tell the little girl. Out there is the world, but we are here.

25 June 1944

Just as You are cautious about what You reveal to us, so too I must be careful not to disrupt her memory for the future. Old people are required to be prudent in what they say. After all, it is their little stories that shape the generation to come.

Memory, I tell myself, is the story's only legitimate offspring. The story's prodigal son.

I am quick to commit to paper everything that surfaces as I scour my memory, to curb any temptation that I might have to pass it on. One woman had her son taken by a witch, who replaced him with a different baby. The woman put the flawed infant on the doorstep and started beating him with all her might with a stick. The child's crying was carried across the bald

mountains, bringing his mother the witch, who called out: “Give me mine, and I will return yours!” There’s a thought for You, Father. Even witches love their children.

I burst out laughing.

The little girl tries to imitate me. Her body contracts. She rocks this way and that, but all she produces is a gurgle, a kind of chirping sound.

Why can’t I do it, Stash?

What am I doing wrong, Stash?

Tell me, Stash.

You promised, Stash.

I take her by the hand. I tell her that it does not say anywhere that God created laughter. Laughter is created by magic, without the Creator having any part of it.

And God saw that it was good, and left the flawed world as it was, because whenever we laugh we remind Him of our presence below and repair the damage that He Himself wrought.

Without our laughter, God Himself would be no more.

7 July 1944

I am proud of her. My little pupil is wise and perceptive. Today we finished reading the Old Testament. Before she falls asleep I remind her of her Matriarchs, Eve and Sarah, Rachel and Leah, Rebecca and Dina, Miriam and Deborah, Yael and Judith, Ruth and Esther, and Michal and Mary. Inscribed over my grandmother’s grave in a distant village are the words: “You have been a good mother to me.”

The child recites the names and asks: How do you know they all actually existed?

I say: We roll out our memory, the way you roll those beads between your fingers.

And what if the string tears? she asks.

Sleep well now, Daughter of all Mothers. Some day you too will be...

On my own tombstone it will say: And what kind of a son were you?

12 July 1944

St Veronica's Day

On the sixth station of His final journey, a woman named Veronica came out of her house. It was very warm in Jerusalem that day, and Christ was perspiring profusely. Veronica wiped his brow with her handkerchief, and an imprint of His face remained on the cloth. I do not know where the handkerchief is. In vessels of precious gold in churches all over Europe they keep pieces of cloth bearing the imprint of His solemn face, but I think that if they ever discover the real handkerchief we will see the Son laughing.

Child, when you practise laughter, the Father struggles too, with all his might, to laugh with you.

26 July 1944

Day of Sts Joachim and Anne

Sometimes I forget who bore me. There is what little I know, and there is all that I will never know. The bed of dust is our schoolroom. With what little knowledge I have, I mark the boundaries of the world. I pour water in the indentations which serve as oceans, rake up mounds to serve as ridges, carve out valleys and expose deserts. Look, Child, deep inside there hides a lost continent.

She listens, and is careful not to tread.

I stick crucifixes in the ground. We have brothers living there, with slanted eyes, and here there are brothers whose skin is dark as coal. At once she touches herself in astonishment.

Children, so I discover, demand absolute truths. I was once like this child, but now I am riddled with doubts. One thing she refrains from asking: where are her own brothers.

Every time I use the word *Jew*, she is horrified.

I tell her, Joachim and Anna, father and mother of Mary, were Jews. She covers her ears with dirt to keep from hearing.

After the lessons, I find her squatting in the niche, drawing on the walls with her piece of charcoal. When I try to peek, she hides it with her body.

Stash, she says, promise me something.

I am silent. Of all my promises, especially my promises to You, Father, none have been kept.

Stash, swear to me that you will never ever die.

I am so afraid she mistakes my embrace for a promise.

1 August 1944

Blessed is the child who has heard the laughter of a rat. Somewhere in the heart of the light that leads to the traces of the life that was, this memory too lives on. To expect laughter in pitch darkness is complete madness. But the rat continues to gape.

And God saw that laughter was good, and left the flawed world as it was.

Teach Him to laugh, Little Girl, and He will be forever grateful.

2 August 1944

The candle near my head is burning. The wind enters through a crack; the flame flickers and dies. Shadows follow the child, and I cannot make out her face. I do not remove my habit, and I jab my claws into the flesh underneath the garment. The body is a receptacle of sins – so I preached in my sermons. If only I could turn into a spirit too.

I am being depleted onto paper.

Why do we not come into the world equipped with a bundle of ready-made memories, a bequest that would nail a lesson into us?

What a monumental concatenation of malignant memories could be avoided if only man could contain the torments of his precursors, imprinted into him like an innate warning system.

But had the little girl known in advance what was waiting for her, wouldn't she have refused to be born?

Only after she falls asleep do I light the candle. Every night I study her lips, to see whether a trace of a smile has begun to grow there.

3 August 1944

But nevertheless, I am at peace.

I who never thought I would be cradling a child or leading her to the serenity of peaceful dreams, am having a revelation. Her hand grasps mine, and I feel the light shine within me. She mumbles something in her sleep. Is it a comforting dream, or a nightmare? I hold my ear closer, prepared to slash through the horror and to draw her back to me.

Mama.

And again, Mama.

Do not forgive me, Father. For if I am the mother in her dream, then I am the happiest creature on earth. Despite all of Your efforts, You have not succeeded in keeping me from having this experience of parenthood. I thank You, Father. And I call out Your name with complete devotion.

10 August 1944

St Lawrence's Day

In the early morning hours, the planes began circling overhead. The bombs fell so close that the blast caused the ground and the walls of the church to shake. The trees at the edge of the forest made a mighty roar as they fell.

We huddled in the niche; the little girl shut herself in there at once. The smell of fires and smoke filtered through.

I want to live. Only now do I realize how desperately.

Today the farmers were supposed to begin the first harvest. Instead of sheaves they are harvesting death. Sinful priest that I am – I gloat over the dead who did not have a chance to receive extreme unction.

We lie there until nightfall, and I try to distract her. All day long I have been anticipating bitter sobs, but her tears are sealed in.

When the ground settles, I discover a charcoal drawing of the Last Judgment on the wall of the niche. She has painted it in the dark, like those ancient cave people. In her drawing, the hand of God reaches under the altar, tipping the scales in full view of the archangel Gabriel. Above them is the Holy Mother on her throne, holding a rat in her lap.

11 August 1944

After they buried their dead and cleared the rubble, the farmers hurried to church. Help us, Father Stanislaw, give us consolation. That is your duty.

Another sermon that I never delivered.

15 August 1944

Assumption of the Blessed

Virgin Mary Morning

The crop has turned golden. It sways in the wind at night, as if by a will of its own. As dawn breaks, a woman sets out into the field with her baby, rocking him continuously. Then she exposes her breast. The harvester has covered one plot of land already, and is now approaching the next. As the two of them come closer, they are careful not to tread on the strips of grass delimiting the plots, because those harbor evil spirits.

A world without sinners.

A world without Jews.

Their laughter cuts through the blades of grass. The harvester leans down towards the woman. She places her baby on the ground beside her, and drops into the wave of gold. A cow lashes its tail over their heads. They abandon themselves to their lust, so much so that they do not notice the baby's crying.

Night-time

The farmers placed the first crop of the harvest inside the church and I blessed it, walking along the pews with the censer in my hand. They breathe it in, and I yearn for my despair to cling to them.

The emptier I become, the fuller my diary is. If ever I were to deliver all those sermons, would I be able to make any difference? I compose them only to soothe my conscience.

The conscience. An organ that cannot be excised.

And there is no prosthetic conscience either.

Maybe these sermons will be delivered by someone else some day. Worthier than I am.

18 August 1944

All week long the village women prepared the enormous wedding cake. The farmer's wife invited the entire complement of German officers to the celebration. With their very own hands they kneaded bread without salt, omen of a sweet married life together. At the top of the cake they hung golden biscuits in the shape of the sun and the moon.

I make sure all the openings of the church are sealed shut, to keep the smell from entering.

20 August 1944

I've performed my duties. My mouth uttered the "Till death do you part".

I am incapable of adding a thing.

28 August 1944

The sound of thunder is heard in the distance.

The little girl and I are waiting.

Will they arrive?

When will they come?

There is a fleeting look of yearning on her face. Or maybe it's her fear of the future. I don't dare think about it. Perhaps she does not want them to keep their promise.

What have I done?

1 September 1944

It seems she is sleeping peacefully. How hard I fought to attain this luxury for her. Suddenly her little body convulses and her pain bursts out.

I am tormented for her. Remembering and reminding – this is the only commandment that still has any meaning, and yet I have been doing everything in my power to erase her memory. For her, forgetting is healing, but for the world, forgetting is the very disease itself.

If I succeed in my efforts of obliteration, perhaps I can place the little girl back on course towards a normal life. But if everything is erased, where will the memory come from? If she forgets, who will remember for her?

All of us are sentenced to march along the Via Dolorosa, but each of us in turn tries to break away from the procession. The most suitable position is that of a bystander, looking from the side of the road on that man kneeling alone under his load. All of us, after all, heave a sigh of relief, whether in our hearts or out loud, when we discover that the cross is being borne on someone else's back, rather than on our own.

14 September 1944

Day of Triumph of the Holy Cross

On this date, in AD 326, the true cross was discovered, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was consecrated in the City of the Jews.

Perhaps I have been chosen as the last witness of their existence, because if all memory of them has been lost, I have a sacred mission: at all costs I must preserve not only the tangible existence of the little girl, but her spiritual existence as well.

The last Jewish child.

And as I write those words, I am overcome with nausea, as if I had written a name-tag over the reliquary. If all of my efforts are aimed at preserving her as a mere relic, then I am no different from those who are trying to annihilate them. Even *they* leave an isolated exemplar on display, protected in a precious vessel behind glass. It would be their way of signaling their triumph, and making certain that it lives on.

15 September 1944

Day of Our Lady of Sorrows

She has been with me for a year now. Let this be your birthday, I told her. The date on which a person arrives in this world is a cause for celebration for those who cherish him. I place a candle upright in the dust and ask her to put it out. She plunges her hand right into the flame, puts it out, and asks: how old am I?

My grandmother never told me when I was born. I suspect I came into the world on St Stanislaw's Day. Perhaps the old woman did not want to hurt me, or maybe she wanted to drive out the anguish I had caused her daughter. In the villages they call a woman who is with child "a woman with hope", but my mother was "a woman with despair" – a hereditary sin.

Disappointed, the little girl overturns the candle. Some children are old people, and some old people are children, and maybe they are a mixture of

both. Had I not been prevented from bearing children, I might have been able to tell them apart.

I open the Scriptures. She reads the Psalm, and I listen to her clear voice.
“Yea, the darkness shall cover me; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.”

A king wrote those words, Child. His name was David and he was a wonderful musician. On gloomy nights he would sing to his predecessor King Saul to drive out his despair, but in the end he was defeated by it.

“I was wrought in secret.”

The little girl is struggling with the words, and I do not bother to correct her. I tell her: One day you will travel to a land both far and near. There is a city there, a real city and not a heavenly one. A place of dubious beauty, but it is yours.

And some day, when you visit the mountain where the Holy Mother sank into eternal slumber, walk down the steps to the crypt and place a small stone there. Direct it towards the light, and it will swallow the memory and set out on the long journey from your past to my future.

I am the bearer of memory, placing my own memory at your disposal because you will not be able to carry the cross by yourself. I am your *remembrancer*.

“We were wrought in secret.”

A Psalm to the children of David.

14 October 1944

The echoes of the shooting are very near. I spot some movement in the bushes at the edge of the forest. The wind carries the thundering of cannons. At twilight the Red Army tanks enter the town square. The villagers grovel before the soldiers, offering up vodka and pork sausage. The farmer’s son is riding on the first tank, and the soldiers are patting him on the back and filling his pockets with cigarettes. In the evening I hear that there is a Jewish officer among them. All day long he went from house to house

asking whether there are any Jews among us. Even when people laughed in his face – they're all dead! – he did not give up.

I went looking for him. Entered the inn even. Into the church he refused to come, as if I were setting a trap for him. Two Hebrew words surfaced suddenly in my mind. I don't know what memory they came from.

Shma Yisrael – Hear O Israel.

The Jewish officer followed me to the churchyard and waited at the gate. I took the little girl to him.

Don't be afraid. This man is your brother.

She clutched the edge of my robe, started tugging at my body.

Make him leave, she cried.

The officer put his hand on the butt of the gun and turned to go.

I knelt before her. I said: I am a Jew too. Forever a Jew.

Frantically she kissed the cross around her neck. I removed my own and put it on the ground.

The officer began to speak to her in the language of the Jews, but she did not respond. He pulled a piece of candy out of his uniform. Her body froze, like on the day when I took her in. I buried my face in the dirt at her feet. I rubbed my nose against the candy, then licked it. Sweet dirt.

Hesitantly she fingered the candy, fluttering over it and withdrawing.

The Jewish officer was kneeling now, on the ground before her.

Whose child are you? What is your name? You can say now.

When he promised to look for her parents, she turned her back and ran inside.

I stood up, my robe forming a cloud. I told him: The Knights of the Holy Grail were forbidden to reveal their name or where they came from.

The officer said: The Zionists are going through the orphanages now. Go hand over the girl.

1 November 1944

All Saints' Day

I lit all the candles in the church. The shadows are scampering in all directions, and the saints are fixing their doleful gazes on me. Perhaps I have infected them with my own despair. How many children of pits and of basements, children of cupboards, children of boxes and niches are coming out of their holes now?

Who will wait for them in a light that is no light?

I wish I were the last sinner.

I doubt it very much.

2 November 1944

All Souls' Day

At night she begged me to baptize her. She swore to do anything to keep me from handing her over.

My Father, give me the strength to withstand the torment I am causing her. The tears I had hoped for so badly are streaming down now. She dropped at my feet, her tiny body convulsing. She hit me with her fists. A Holy Communion is what she craves, to partake of the bread and the wine. A tiny bride, draped in white, marching towards the altar. A nun she wants to be. I put my arm around her. If only I could swap places with her. Her warm tears wet me.

In the end she immersed herself in the baptismal font.

I told her: Baptism won't do any good, because my faith does not force itself on anyone. A child is only baptized with both parents' consent.

But they promised, she screamed.

She tore the rosary and pulled off the beads. They rolled over the church floor.

Apostasy – that is the term that Jews use for their spiritual annihilation, the officer told me, for reneging on one's faith.

How can I explain to the child that if I cause her to renege on her people there will be no forgiveness.

The beads scatter. I crawl around and hurt myself.

I did not succeed in finding all of them.

3 November 1944

Stash!

You're bad, Stash!

The worst, Stash!

Her cries cut through me. I will know no peace, day or night. The beast of memory will remain trapped in the lair of my body, sinking its teeth into me and biting. But I am grateful, because the bleeding wound will keep me from forgetting her.

Mother, Mother, why have you forsaken me!

Thus cry all of the nameless children.

6 December 1944

"Parents, do not mourn your children too much." If the village elders knew of the rupture in my world they would try to comfort me with the banal saying and throw in the story about the daughter who was sentenced to carry buckets upon buckets of her mother's tears in the world to come. And about another daughter who was said to return to earth just so she could beg her mother to stop crying, or else her grave would be flooded.

For the child's sake I will keep silent.

My grave will remain dry. This is a promise I will keep.

25 December 1944

Christmas Day

I sit in the niche, facing the drawing of the Madonna with the rat. She has a Star of David around her neck, which I added using a twig that had been covered over with dirt. It seems as if I can feel laughter taking form in the darkness. The rat is not laughing out of joy or derision. The rat's mouth is gaping at the horror of that which will be and that which has been. It is the laughter of those who accompany the dead, as they stare into the pit.

People around are hushing them. A disgrace. A desecration. But against their will they are rolling with laughter.

1 January 1945

I am sealing the diary because I cannot trust the memory of humans. It is not a part of Creation, because Adam was born without a memory. But memory is the only thing that was created in Your image. Both You and memory are a decaying image, hobbling along on crutches and tagging behind all the others.

Little Girl, if only I could see you before I leave this world, because there is no other.

You are flesh of my flesh.

To embrace you, one more time, body to body.

28 February 1945

Thomas Aquinas put down his pen and said: "I can do no more. Such secrets have been revealed to me that all I have written now appears to be of little value."

As for me, I feel that everything that is of value has already been written, and I have nothing to add.

I seal my diary, and bury it deep in the empty lair. The farmers have set traps and placed poison bait at all the openings, and the scourge has been eliminated.

For now.

But the rats will come back, sooner or later, because they follow us everywhere. The stowaways who travel along with us are not monsters, because they were created in order to survive.

They will survive when we are gone too.

Maybe history is a kind of story, a kind of poem, a collection of legends or dreams that people tell themselves at night. And these stories and legends and poems and dreams embody the truth, in a code that few will want to decipher.

Some day in the future, memory will be packaged like merchandise, turning into nothing more than a thick cloud, and the story of one little girl will be swallowed up within it.

And I cannot count on the little girl's memory either, because I did everything within my power to erase it. I destroyed it, knowing full well that this would preserve her body and her soul for the rest of her life, which had been entrusted to me for safe keeping. But I do not absolve myself of responsibility for doing so, which is why I bury the memory in a box outside the boundaries of her body, a kind of light-giving heavenly body that will circle her and shed its reflected light – so long as she herself is not branded by it. This testimony will lie in the darkness until such time as the girl is no longer with us, and I too will have gone the way of all flesh. And perhaps I will then be in a place where I can confront You with my reckoning and demand that You pay.

And I will be closer to You than ever before.

I tear my clothing as mourners do. Bury my head in the dirt. Her novice's outfit lies on the ground beside me. I lie in the lair breathing in the smell of her, and ask myself how much longer I can rely on such a flimsy means of regaining my memories of her.

Like a blind man, I feel the charcoal drawing with my fist and try to create laughter. This memory will live on, I promise myself, just as the laughter of the rat will always be there. It is a laughter that evolves in such utter darkness that we cannot even suspect it exists. Even if we ourselves never laugh it, we will always hope that someone else might, no matter what happens, in spite of everything.

I bury this testimony and seal it shut. Lazarus in shrouds. Some day it will rise from the dead.

The Jews did exist.

The little girl does exist.

Against all forgettings, this memory shall prevail.

I hoist everything that I am and brandish it beyond my corporeal self, beyond my spiritual self too. St Stanislaw knew that his death was near, while I know that mine has already taken place.

Maybe Your death too, Father.

I lost not only the little girl, but even her memory in days to come. And her love too. This will be my punishment.

She will despise me, and will justly sentence me to oblivion.

You and I are both in mourning now. Bereaved parents. You are my Father and I am not Your son. I am her Stash, and she is my daughter.

Daughter. This is your true name. I had a daughter and I lost her.

And perhaps some day a miracle will happen, and you will find the strength to remember me. One vibrant moment of razor-blade memory. That is my only wish. I will rise out of the *Tohu* and *Bohu* within you, I will stretch out my rat tail, and I will laugh to you.

Before the end – forgive me, my daughter, bless me, for I have sinned.